

The Social Logic of “False Memories”: Symbolic Awakenings and Symbolic Worlds in Survivor and Retractor Narratives

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Taking an interactionist, narrative approach to psychology’s “memory wars,” I analyze the accounts of self-identified survivors of childhood sexual abuse (traditionally emphasized by “recovered” memory advocates) and the accounts of retractors—those who reject their former memories of childhood sexual abuse (traditionally emphasized by “false” memory advocates). Although typically held to be oppositional, both groups conform to similar patterns of storytelling. Both survivors and retractors use scripted symbolic awakenings to account for their past mnemonic “errors” and their more recent discovery of “truth.” Such symbolic awakenings are important mechanisms of mnemonic and autobiographical revision. Further, both groups use vocabularies of cognitive constraint to claim that cognitive authority figures once controlled their ability to interpret and remember their experiences. I approach the question of childhood sexual abuse and memory with attention to the distinctly social influences on cognition. I argue that the experiences of recovering and retracting memories involve similar social processes of remembering and storytelling. Keywords: memory, narrative, cognition, autobiography, symbolic awakenings

Here in my Father’s house, generations meet in between truth and
fantasy to find a bridge. . . . My whole truth is now shattered. What
really happened to me? . . . What do I do now? What I thought,
now is a dream. Is this just another switch to another person
inside me or am I really here?
— *In My Father’s House*, anonymous poem posted on the False
Memory Syndrome Foundation Web site

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Over the course of two decades, researchers and clinicians have debated the veracity of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse. Careers have been made and destroyed in this increasingly polarized and often bitter “memory war.” Therapists struggle with questions about how to best treat their clients, not to mention fears of debilitating lawsuits and public campaigns alleging gross professional misconduct. Clients struggle to understand newly acquired memories of childhood sexual abuse that often implicate a close relative or another significant adult. They often make unanticipated accusations that have serious consequences for their families. Moreover, this debate has only sharpened with time, becoming increasingly antagonistic as it concerns a growing number of people.

On one side, recovered memory advocates claim that memories of childhood sexual abuse are commonly hidden from the victim’s conscious awareness (Anderson 2001; Arnold and Lindsay 2002; Briere 1995; Fivush 1995; Freyd 1996; Freyd, DePrince, and Zurbriggen 2001; Herman [1981] 2000; Schooler 2001; Tessler and Nelson 1994; van der Kolk and Fisler 1995; Williams 1994). They claim that, because of the traumatic character of sexual abuse, children often avoid any memory of the experience, only to “recover” their memories later in life.¹ This camp regularly calls attention to survivor stories: accounts of individuals who claim to have been sexually abused as children, specifically those who claim to have recovered memories years after the alleged abuse experience.

On the other side, false memory advocates argue that recovered memories are highly unreliable (FMSF 2006; Hyman and Loftus 1998; Kaplan and Manicavasagar 2001; Loftus 1993, 2003; Loftus, Polonsky, and Fullilove 1994; Ofshe and Waters 1994). Proponents of this view call recovered memories “false memories” and define them as “believed-in imaginings that are not based in historical reality” (FMSF 2006). This camp calls attention to retractor stories: accounts of individuals who once claimed to recover memories of sexual abuse only to later retract their accusations. False memory advocates argue that irresponsible therapists or popular self-help literature authors have implanted false memories and that the accused are victims of objectively false allegations.

Using an interactionist, narrative approach, I aim to reconceptualize this debate, arguing that neither side is exclusively right or wrong. From my perspective, both recovered memory advocates and false memory advocates are concerned, somewhat ironically, with a different type of “false memory.”² Recovered memory advocates highlight the problem of missing information from one’s autobiographical past that one recovers at a later time. This camp thus highlights the presence of false *negatives* in survivor stories. False memory advocates consider the problem of mistaken beliefs about past experiences that, in reality, did not exist. This camp thus highlights the presence of false *positives* in retractor stories. Making this distinction, I expand the conventional notion of false memory to include both *false mnemonic negatives* and *false mnemonic positives*, and seek to elucidate the social foundations of “falseness” in each type of

claim by considering how self-identified survivors and retractors tell stories about their lives.³

Given this reformulation of the question of false memories, both survivors and retractors tell stories that are formally quite similar. Both describe a similar transition from a false memory to a true understanding of the past. Such *symbolic awakenings* are important mechanisms of mnemonic and autobiographical revision also common to narratives of religious conversion and the attainment of political consciousness. Further, both survivors and retractors use formulaic *vocabularies of cognitive constraint* to account for their prior state of delusion and false consciousness. Finally, both claim that their cognitive options were restricted by *cognitive authority figures* who controlled their abilities to perceive and interpret their experiences.⁴ Both story types conform to a similar social model of storytelling.

Prior sociological studies focus on the cultural influences shaping accounts of childhood sexual abuse (Davis 2002; Jenkins 1998; Nathan and Snedeker 1995) without considering their formal similarity to retractor accounts. In doing so, these studies ignore rich symbolic dimensions common to both story types and to the recovered versus false memory controversy in general. However, two important studies pave the way for my analysis of the common, formal character of survivor and retractor narratives. Davis (2005:545) calls for "an understanding of victim status as a narrative accomplishment" in his study of retractor accounts. Prager (1998) presents a psychoanalytic case study of a patient who recovers and then retracts a memory of childhood sexual abuse. Building on their insights, I approach the question of childhood sexual abuse and memory with attention to the distinctly social influences on cognition and elucidate generic, social processes that we use to transform our life stories through time. From my perspective, psychology's memory wars are unnecessarily acrimonious battles between two camps locked in a destructive power struggle. Their diametrical approaches to this debate obscure important social processes behind both survivor and retractor claims.

METHODS AND DATA

In this article, I use first-person survivor and retractor narratives to theorize about the social influences that shape these stories.⁵ I examined survivor narratives from three prominent Web sites established to provide resources to survivors and raise public awareness of childhood sexual abuse: *Escaping Hades—a Rape and Sexual Abuse Survivor's Site* (containing several hundred stories and poems), *Susan Smiles—Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse* (containing approximately 120 stories and poems), and *Safeguarding Our Children—Uniting Mothers (SOC-UM)* (containing approximately 50 stories and poems). I examined retractor stories from two Web sites established to undermine popular belief in the legitimacy of recovered memories: the False Memory Syndrome Foundation Web site (containing 33 stories) and

StopBadTherapy.com (containing 19 stories).⁶ When I gathered these survivor stories (in 2003–04) and retractor stories (in 2005–06), a thorough search revealed these Web sites to be the most prominent online venues publishing such accounts. I reviewed every story appearing on each of these sites. Further, I examined additional survivor narratives from a popular anthology (Bass and Thornton [1983] 1991) and two published autobiographies (Ammons 2001; Fraser 1987). I drew additional retractor narratives from two well-known published collections (Goldstein and Farmer 1993; Pendergrast 1995).

I take a two-pronged approach to narrative analysis. On the one hand, I explore the influence of “narrative environments” (Gubrium 2005) on both sets of accounts. All the accounts outlined above are formulaic, public stories individuals produce and display in social sites of self-representation where autobiographical work (Davis 2005; Vinitzky-Seroussi 1998) is being done. Whether online or in print, survivors produce scripted stories that involve common plots, turning points, and vocabularies within the social contexts of survivorhood. Likewise, retractors produce scripted stories within the social contexts of retractorhood. With attention to these narrative features, I aim to elucidate the memory rules at work when survivors and retractors attribute meaning to their past experiences and account for changes in their perceptions of important events and interactions when telling their stories in publicly accessible settings.

On the other hand, I explore the formal structure of these stories (Howard 2006; White [1974] 1978; Zerubavel 2003), identifying patterns in narrative form that span different analytic contexts. Thus, while survivor and retractor narratives can be juxtaposed with regard to their competing claims about reality, they are, I argue, similar with regard to their formal properties. Each narrative type conforms to a similar “social pattern” (Zerubavel 2007) of storytelling, regardless of their respective differences. In the methodological tradition of Georg Simmel, this “theme-driven style of inquiry” (Zerubavel 2007:10) requires that I focus on “analytic highlight reels” (Brekhus 2003:8) of these otherwise different stories, engaging in a particular style of “analytic bracketing” (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:120; see also Davis 2005:335). I therefore consciously ignore many aspects of these narratives in order to focus on the patterned ways that survivors and retractors juxtapose the present context of their storytelling with a past state of delusion and false consciousness. I thus highlight stories that specifically describe such a patterned autobiographical transformation at the expense of stories that describe only the narrator’s present psychological state, for example.

This two-pronged approach, I argue, allows us to consider important social mechanisms that survivors and retractors use to craft meaningful stories about life-changing experiences. As they account for their past mnemonic errors and their more recent discovery of “truth,” both survivors and retractors conform to similar patterns of storytelling. Such an approach reveals psychology’s memory wars to be a battle between two antagonistic camps defending similar processes of mnemonic discovery and personal transformation.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF SURVIVORHOOD

The inside mother is a guide—To bring the hidden hungry child outside.
—Whitney Lyons, "Inside Mother Outside Child"

Narrating the Awakening to Survivorhood

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse tell stories about their lives in a variety of institutionalized contexts (Holstein and Gubrium 2000), from group therapy sessions to survivor Web sites. These are social locations of memory and narrative construction where survivors typically reveal one or more incidents of sexual abuse in their childhood and attribute serious consequences to these experiences. Survivors filter their stories through these contexts (Davis 1983:285n17; DeGloia and Friedman 2005), highlighting certain details and events in order to attribute a particular meaning to their lives. They look to established story models (Davis 2002) and shape their personal accounts according to a shared formula or script. Consequently, narrators learn to regard their present-day psychological condition as a body of evidence that they can decode to reveal sexual abuse in their past. Recovered memory advocates stress this logic of discovery in popular survivor manuals such as *The Courage to Heal*:

Children often cope with abuse by forgetting it ever happened. As a result, you may have no conscious memory of being abused. . . . You may think you don't have memories, but often as you begin to talk about what you do remember there emerges a constellation of feelings, reactions, and recollections that add up to substantial information. (Bass and Davis 1994:22)

While some survivors use the explicit language of "repressed" and "recovered" memories and some do not directly indicate whether or not they suffered a period of amnesia, they commonly employ a logic of discovery that involves a scripted re-interpretation of childhood experiences. Beyond simple forgetting and remembering, survivors more commonly describe awakening from a past state of confusion, or "false" consciousness (where the "true" nature of the sexual abuse was disguised), to a later state of enlightenment. One incest survivor, Sylvia Fraser (1987:7), recounts,

I didn't used to be afraid of the dark but now I know that demons and monsters hide in the cubbyholes of my bed. I am afraid one will jump out at me, and rub dirty dirty up against me with his wet-ums sticking out.

Yarrow Morgan ([1983] 1991:87–88) captures a similar confused and dreamlike perspective, as she recalls seeing a "pink and purple wormlike thing above her body" as she slept. Both Fraser and Morgan use a childhood voice to tell us that they originally understood their experiences in the same way that children fear darkness and monsters at night (notably, nighttime and darkness are socially recognized as a realm of vulnerability, evil, and anonymity). Both narrators are now rejecting their childhood perspectives while evoking them to describe and explain their experiences

of sexual abuse. Metaphorically speaking, they juxtapose the darkness of their childhoods with the enlightenment of survivorhood.

Survivors use such symbolic awakenings to explain their autobiographical revisions and to account for the fact that they did not tell their abuse story sooner. In the process, they reinterpret childhood experiences that may have always been remembered. Carol states, "I was so young and dumb that I thought it was really a game that big people play and I played like that with my sisters and cousins thinking that I was grown up because some one had taught me what adults did." Similarly, Ellen explains, "I thought it was a game. . . . I just thought this was our secret game. . . . My father continued to show me all these positions which was like a new game and as if I received points for having him ejaculate." Pattie recalls, "It all started off as just a little game that I would innocently play with him."

What Carol, Ellen, and Pattie once understood to be a game or play they now understand to be sexual abuse. They use a formulaic awakening to reject childhood definitions of experience in favor of a survivorhood perspective on the past. Such redefinitions have both "backward and forward reach," calling into question "a linked series of prior occasions and anticipated ones" (Goffman [1974] 1986:120) based on the newly discovered perspective, perhaps resulting in a feeling that one is discovering the memory of sexual abuse for the first time (see Schooler 2001:118).⁷ Robin uses quotation marks to accomplish a similar autobiographical revision:

I have been remembering more, more details. . . . the pieces started coming together. . . . My own father. He SA [sexually assaulted] me for all of my toddler years, and more. We were "married" he had given me a "special ring," he told me I was special and this was just between him and I, not to be shared with Mommy. I remember the downstairs bathroom and how he "washed" me, I remember how he "dried" me when I was naked by our pool at night, I remember our "cloth game," the cloth was my "blankie." I remember how my mother commented when I was an adult, that I was inseparable from my father, that she was jealous of me.

Robin is rejecting past definitions of childhood in favor of a new survivorhood lens. As she redefines various childhood experiences, she also describes her past state of delusion, or false consciousness, and her awakening into truth. In the process, she radically transforms her relationship with her father and mother.

Symbolic awakenings are mechanisms of autobiographical revision that survivors use to construct and account for false mnemonic negatives and delayed accusations. As survivors juxtapose a past false understanding with a present true understanding, they establish a cognitive turning point in their life stories and explain the lapse in time between the alleged sexual abuse and their telling of the story, alleviating pressure to have continually remembered the event. This formulaic transformation of consciousness allows survivors to assert *mnemonic authority*: the authority to redefine past experiences and relationships and reinvent their lives. Narrators can then associate their standpoint as "survivor" with overcoming a false perception and awakening into a true understanding.

Vocabularies of Cognitive Constraint: The Symbolic Worlds of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Survivors make specific claims about the contexts and dynamics of sexual abuse. In particular, they describe their abuse experience in a way that explains their past containment in a world of deception and false consciousness. I explore two typical vocabularies of cognitive constraint that survivors use to describe the symbolic worlds of childhood sexual abuse: *game and play* and *dream and fantasy*. In each case, narrators call our attention to an asymmetry of cognitive authority between perpetrator and child, highlighting the socializing power that adults exercise in the family and other institutional settings, such as churches and schools. They claim that the accused adult authority figure masked the sexual character of their experience, shaping their perception and memory of the situation.⁸ Survivors thus explain false mnemonic negatives with reference to the social dynamics and symbolic character of the sexual abuse interaction itself.

Game and Play

As indicated in the previous section, survivors commonly claim that, as children, they understood sexual contact with an adult authority figure to be a game. Vicki recalls, "I learned young how to cope with 'Daddy's game.' . . . And the fact that I repressed the memories of my abuse for years only adds to my family's disbelief." Kelly remembers, "He would say this is a special game for daddy's [*sic*] and their girls and not to tell anyone. . . . I can't remember all details yet as I repressed a lot of them." While Vicki and Kelly now understand their past experiences to be sexual abuse, they are telling us that they previously perceived these same experiences to be a type of game. They both further claim that "Daddy" masked the interaction, limiting or controlling their ability to attribute meaning to their experiences. Likewise, speaking about herself in the third person, Radhika states,

The only problem was that her friend's father was a monster. He would want to play monster games and he had big monster hands. He would hurt the little girl with his hands. . . . But he said it was a nice game.

Survivors use a vocabulary of game and play to define the symbolic character of the sexual abuse interaction.⁹ They use this unique "vocabulary of motive" (Mills [1940] 1974:439–52) to explain how adult authority figures disguise childhood sexual abuse as an agreed-on intersubjective domain of consciousness with agreed-on rules. Such an interactive disguise distinguishes sexual abuse from both mundane day-to-day interaction and counternormative abusive interaction. Survivors thus account for how perpetrators separate the abuse experience from the rest of day-to-day life (Furniss 1991:25–26), effectively making the abuse experience both sacred (and thus memorable) and masked (and thus understood as something other than abuse)—(temporarily) disguised in its significance but marked for later reinterpretation.

Games have temporal and contextual boundaries that contain children within a symbolic world of meaning. Such containment facilitates a socially determined intimacy that, like secrets, offers the participants “the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world” (Simmel 1950:330), signifying a temporary, alternate reality. Survivors tell us that playing “picture poker” (Ammons 2001:26), “wrestling” (Bill’s story), holding golf “putting lessons” (Andrew’s story), or playing “gold fish” (Lucille’s story) provided an entrance ritual (Furniss 1991:25–26) or a “grooming” mechanism (Veldhuis and Freyd 1999) that drew them into a sexually abusive interaction. They claim that perpetrators organize such perceptual cover-worlds to minimize or eliminate the perceptual “shock” (Schutz [1945] 1973:233–34) that might otherwise mark a sexually abusive encounter. Further, survivors use such narrative tools to explain how the perpetrators maintained their authoritative role (as parent, uncle, priest, or teacher) throughout (and after) the interaction, thus ensuring the child’s socially facilitated trust and silence.

A vocabulary of game and play has some additional consequences. Survivors use such a vocabulary to account for their participation in the sexual interaction. The properties of the game provide for a voluntary and, and in some cases, enthusiastic participation by both the child and the adult. Thus a grandfather who plays the “spanking game”¹⁰ with his grandson or an uncle who plays the “penis showing game” with his niece (Thornton [1983] 1991:149) would not need to force the child directly to do anything, as the child’s motivations and voluntary participation are structured within the social rules of play. Further, survivors use these vocabularies to convey a chilling sociomental dimension of betrayal as they describe their deception at the hands of a trusted cognitive authority figure. Finally, survivors use a vocabulary of game and play to explain how other trusted adults failed to detect their sexual abuse.

According to survivors, perpetrators mask sexual abuse as “playing horsy” (Joann’s story), “naptime games” (Simone’s story), “our secret special game” (Monica’s story), or simply playing “the game” (Erin’s story). In telling these stories, survivors describe an asymmetry of cognitive authority between their childhood selves and the accused adult authority figure. The perpetrator in these stories teaches the child to disassociate from any sexual meaning and instead interpret the activity as a game. Survivors thus describe the lived experience of childhood sexual abuse in a way that accounts for the interactional constraints on their perception and memory of the experience. The interaction of adult and child at play constitutes a cognitive mask that is later peeled away when survivors tell their stories in the contexts of survivorhood.

Dream and Fantasy

Survivors commonly use a vocabulary of dream and fantasy to claim that they once understood sexual abuse to be a figment of their imagination. Whereas a vocabulary of game and play is about redefining otherwise real experiences, this

vocabulary is about distinguishing between the "real" and the "unreal." Survivors use a vocabulary of dream and fantasy not only to define the symbolic character of their sexual abuse experience (an *experiential narrative*) but also to describe how adult authority figures denied the existence of sexual abuse, debunking their belief that the abuse was real (a *repudiation narrative*).

Using a vocabulary of dream and fantasy in an experiential narrative, survivors describe the organization and context of the abusive interaction. Phillip explains,

When I was fourteen, my mother used to come into my bed in the early hours of the morning, arouse me sexually, and sexual intercourse would take place. Until recently (I am now fifty-two) I thought I had dreamed those sessions, because I must have never been fully awake. . . . I can't tell you how I felt when this dawned on me. (Elliott 1994:176)

Speaking about herself in the third person, Radhika recalls,

One night when staying at her grandparents it was very dark and a big monster came in. Or maybe he came from under the bed. And he was on top of her and she traveled away, she was not there and it was not happening to her. The next morning she was somewhere else. She had moved to sleep with her grandfather and her grandmother had moved to sleep in the kitchen. "Why am I here? Why is grandmother sleeping in the kitchen?" she just got some unclear answers. Maybe she had walked in her sleep.

While Phillip and Radhika now understand their past experiences to be sexual abuse, they are telling us that they previously thought these same experiences were some type of dreamlike fantasy. Like Fraser and Morgan, they claim that perpetrators embedded a sexual abuse interaction within an environment of sleep and dreams, limiting or controlling their ability to give meaning to their experiences.

Survivors merge the experience of sleeping/dreaming and the environment of the nighttime bedroom into a vocabulary of dream and fantasy in order to define the symbolic character of their abuse experience and account for their prior state of delusion and false consciousness. Notably, the nighttime bedroom environment involves several elements of isolation (darkness, sleep, a closed door, silence). Further, "bedtime" is typically the social setting of a transitional period that "temporarily liquefies the solidity of everyday reality" (Davis 1983:16). Children commonly mark their transition to bed with rituals that involve "imaginal experience" (Del Clark 1995:3, 21). In addition, sleep is the realm of unconscious experience, and children learn that dreaming involves symbolic experiences that are otherwise "unreal." When survivors use a vocabulary of dream and fantasy, they draw on these contextual features to explain how perpetrators separated sexual abuse from their conscious, day-to-day experiences. Such an experiential disguise masks sexual abuse as a mental figment but simultaneously leaves it marked (like our dreams often are) for later reinterpretation.

As survivors describe their experiences with a vocabulary of dream and fantasy, the perpetrator exercises a conscious control over the child's definition of reality. The perpetrator in the story exploits a distinct asymmetry of cognitive authority to

undo “the very external reality of the ongoing sexual abuse in the process of the abusive act itself” (Furniss 1991:25). The child-victim may facilitate the social isolation of the sexual abuse experience by “pretending to sleep” (Amanda’s story; Heather’s story). The child may even facilitate the merger of sexual contact with dreamworld with a form of fantasy (Vicki’s story) or psychological dissociation, such as removing “myself out of my body and [lying] there” (Madeleine’s story). Like a vocabulary of game and play, a vocabulary of dream and fantasy adds an unnerving sociomental dimension of betrayal to survivor stories. Even when the narrator always remembered the abuse experience, the adult authority figure in these stories organized the sexual interaction to make the child believe that it did not actually happen.

Alternatively, when survivors use a vocabulary of dream and fantasy in a repudiation narrative, they describe the accounting practices of “mnemonic others” (Zerubavel 1997:83–84) who cooperate with perpetrators to deny the existence of sexual abuse. Survivors commonly tell us how third parties (traditionally called “enablers”) reinforced the perpetrator’s denial of the abuse by reiterating, for example, that the child’s abuse experience was only a dream (Denise’s story; Harriet’s story). Morgan ([1983] 1991:88–89) writes in her poem *Remember*: “Woke her mommy who listened and said, ‘It’s not real, it’s not real; go back to sleep, it’s not real; it didn’t happen.’” Like many survivors, Morgan links her mother’s repudiation of the abuse with her own difficulty remembering when she says, “Mother to daughter; blank it out. Teach us to numb ourselves, teach us not to feel. The memory does not come easy.”

Survivors use a vocabulary of dream and fantasy in a repudiation narrative to describe their past containment in a symbolic world (typically, but not necessarily, a family) that is defined by an expressed denial of their sexual abuse experience. Even when the narrator continues to recall the abuse on a personal, psychological level (as many claim to do), the enabler stabilizes the denial of abuse on a social level (Zerubavel 2006) by providing a “second opinion” that the abuse was “only a bad dream” (Corine’s story), that the child “dreamt the whole thing up” (Daphne’s story), or that they “must be confusing reality with fantasy” (Sonya’s story). The tertiary authority figure in the story chooses not to see or acknowledge the abuse despite evidence that could otherwise be attended, limiting or controlling the child’s ability to attribute meaning to his or her experiences.

Survivors use a vocabulary of dream and fantasy to describe their prior containment in a false world and to justify their delayed accusations. Survivors use this particular vocabulary of cognitive constraint to map the actual silence of the nighttime environment to the metaphoric silence associated with repressed memories and social denial. They claim that perpetrators and enablers extended the boundaries of dream and fantasy to surround their experience of sexual abuse, rendering their abuse experience outside the realm of consciousness and “reality.” Their symbolic awakening into “truth” then maps to an awakening from a dream when they tell their stories in the social contexts of survivorhood.

Survivorhood and the Symbolic Worlds of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Beyond game and play and dream and fantasy, survivors claim that perpetrators masked sexual abuse as bathing (Desi [1983] 1991:140; Robin's story), a medical procedure (Amber's story; Jennifer's story; Rachel's story), wrestling (Bill's story), sex education (Berliner 2000), helping with work (Schwartz [1983] 1991:183–84), "special attention" (Tammy's story), a ritual of seeking and receiving permission (Saige's story), prayer (Jaclyn's story), or a variety of other experiences. Survivors use these vocabularies to simultaneously recall their abuse experiences and account for their past state of false memory with reference to the dynamics of the sexual abuse interaction itself. In each case, they use scripted social processes to reinterpret important childhood experiences and relationships. This perspective suggests that recovering memories involves important social processes of mnemonic and autobiographical revision that, as I show below, are formally similar to how retractors reinterpret their past experiences.

When survivors use vocabularies of cognitive constraint, they highlight the socializing power that adult authority figures exercise in the family and other institutional settings, such as churches and schools. Children trust adults to mediate their sense of reality in these settings, the same places where childhood sexual abuse typically occurs. Survivors tell stories about being deceived by trusted adult authority figures, losing their grip on reality, and awakening to truth in the contexts of survivorhood. Here, therapists and other survivors offer new interpretive perspectives that individuals use to redefine their past experiences. Individuals reject past definitions of their childhood in favor of new definitions and learn to tell their life stories in a new way as they affiliate with a *culture of survivorhood*.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF RETRACTORHOOD

Oh lost child that she is, when she awakes from her nightmare and
joins the world of reality again, how she will grieve forever more.

—Anonymous letter posted on the False Memory
Syndrome Foundation Web site

Narrating the Awakening to Retractorhood

Retractors tell stories about their lives in various institutionalized contexts, from False Memory Syndrome Foundation meetings (Davis 2005:542) to retractor Web sites. These are social locations of memory and narrative construction where retractors typically describe having made an accusation of childhood sexual abuse based on a "false memory," leading to devastating consequences for the parties involved. Retractors filter their stories through these social contexts, highlighting specific details and events in order to give meaning to their lives and account for present-day problems. They look to established story models and shape their personal accounts according to a shared formula or script (Davis 2005).¹¹ Consequently, narrators

learn to regard their “recovered” memories of childhood sexual abuse as “false” memories.

Like survivors, retractors commonly describe awakening from a past state of delusion (where the true nature of the past was disguised) to a later state of enlightenment. One retractor, Gail Macdonald (1999), states,

We were living in an unreal world of “recovered memories” of events that never took place. . . . We were the lucky ones, the ones who managed to escape back to reality from the insane world.

Similarly, Cheryl states, “At least the truth will be known. There is no beauty in a world of falseness. There is no freedom in a cage of lies. . . . I have been lost and afraid but I have found my way back” (*FMSF Newsletter* 1995c). Whereas Macdonald and Cheryl once believed they were sexually abused as children, both narrators now reject their survivorhood perspectives. Further, they express a clear sense of their containment or imprisonment in an unreal world or a world of fantasy where false memories flourished. Metaphorically speaking, they escape from this cage of survivorhood and awaken into the truth of retractorhood.

Retractors use symbolic awakenings to explain their autobiographical revisions (Davis 2005:540–41) and account for their past state of delusion and false consciousness. As they describe their discovery of the truth, retractors reinterpret their survivorhood experiences and relationships. While narrators once understood the events of childhood to be abusive and traumatic, they now understand the events of survivorhood in this light. Jean says, “I am an FMS survivor and I hope and pray that my story will help others out there who . . . were abused by their therapists and psychiatrists as well” (*FMSF Newsletter* 1995b). Using the metaphor of sexual assault, Maria says, “I realized that my mind had been raped” (Pendergrast 1995:340). Comparing therapy to another socially established trauma, Tina states, “I sometimes wonder if it is like coming out of a concentration or POW camp and walking back into the real world again” (*FMSF Newsletter* 1995d). As Jean, Maria, and Tina redefine survivorhood in this way, they also claim that their current troubles were caused by their therapists.

Retractors use symbolic awakenings to reject survivorhood definitions of their experiences in favor of a retractorhood perspective. What they once saw to be true and enlightening from the perspective of survivorhood, they now understand to be false and illusory from the vantage point of retractorhood. Consequently, they reinterpret their previous memories of their childhood sexual abuse experiences as “believed-in imaginings” (FMSF 2006). Such a reinterpretation is facilitated by the use of quotation marks in Beth’s account,

At the end of 2-1/2 years of therapy, I had come to fully believe that I had been impregnated by my father twice. I “remembered” that he had performed a coat hanger abortion on me. . . . I also “recalled” that he had inserted a curling iron, scissors and a meat fork inside of me, and other “horrors.” I came to believe this without a doubt and could “remember” it happening detail by detail. (*FMSF Newsletter* 1998)

Similarly, Elizabeth recalls, "I dutifully began to 'remember': I was four years old. . . . my mother and I . . . sat down under a tree and my mother forced me to do certain things" (*FMSF Newsletter* 1994a). Whereas Beth and Elizabeth once understood their experiences to be sexual abuse, they now *reunderstand* these perceptions to be false memories. They reject survivorhood definitions of the past in favor of a retractorhood lens. They simultaneously describe their false memories and account for their awakening into truth. In the process, they re-create their life stories and radically transform their relationships with their therapists and parents.

Retractors use symbolic awakenings to explain false mnemonic positives, account for false accusations, and justify their reinterpretations of the past. Like survivors, retractors use these narrative tools to establish a cognitive turning point in their life stories and assert the mnemonic authority to redefine past experiences and relationships. What used to be sexual abuse is now fantasy; what used to be an abusive childhood is now a relatively normal one. As with survivor narratives, such redefinitions reach into both past and future, calling into question various events and relationships based on the newly discovered perspective. As a result, retractors describe "waking up from a bad dream" (Nell's story, Pendergrast 1995:349), coming "out of the fog" (Naomi's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1995d), opening up their mind (Amy's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1994d), and starting a "journey back home" (Beth's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1998). Narrators can then associate their standpoint as "retractor" with overcoming a false memory and awakening into a true understanding.

Vocabularies of Cognitive Constraint: The Symbolic Worlds of Survivorhood

Retractors make specific claims about the contexts and dynamics of survivorhood. In particular, they describe their psychotherapeutic experiences in a way that explains their past containment in a world of deception and false consciousness. I explore two typical vocabularies of cognitive constraint that retractors use to describe the symbolic worlds of survivorhood: *the therapy cult* and *the false family*. In each case, retractors call our attention to an asymmetry of cognitive authority that is typical of psychotherapeutic relationships. They claim that the accused therapeutic authority figure implanted memories of sexual abuse and redefined their childhood.¹² Retractors thus explain false mnemonic positives with reference to the social dynamics and symbolic character of survivorhood.

The Therapy Cult

Retractors commonly claim that they were indoctrinated into a cult of survivorhood. Lauri recalls,

My therapist had a group of five women participating in this dysfunctional, cult-like treatment. Our therapist was using mind games to control us and convince us he was the only person who could help us. (*FMSF Newsletter* 1994b)

Similarly, Trish recalls, "When I look back now I define the last four years like I was in a cult; the only member of the cult was me and the cult leader was my therapist" (*FMSF Newsletter* 1996b). Elizabeth reflects, "It was almost like joining a cult, with my therapist as guru and me a faithful disciple" (*FMSF Newsletter* 1994a). Lauri, Trish, and Elizabeth are telling us that, while they once thought they were in therapy, they now believe they were in a cult (see also Davis 2005:539). Further, they are claiming that their trusted therapist was, in reality, a sadistic cult leader.

Retractors use a therapy cult vocabulary to reinterpret their survivorhood experiences. Further, they use this vocabulary to explain their false memories with reference to the symbolic character of survivorhood. Accordingly, what they once thought was a therapeutic experience, they now describe as "brainwashing" (Robert's story, Pendergrast 1995:360; Sharon's story, Goldstein and Farmer 1993:225; Dawn's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1993), "mind control" (Macdonald 1999), or "mental torture" (Kia's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1995b). What they once believed to be memories of sexual abuse, they now see as an "illusion" (Tina's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1995d), the effects of a "spell" (Brian's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1994c), or a "trance" (Diana's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1995a).

As they account for their prior state of false consciousness, retractors use this vocabulary to juxtapose two contradictory definitions of survivorhood ("therapy" and "cult"). On the one hand, they tell us that they mistakenly thought they were engaging in "therapy." Retractors use this dimension of the vocabulary to account for their willing participation in (what they now understand to be) a cultlike environment. They claim that therapeutic authority figures lured them into a destructive relationship by promising they would "be healed and able to lead a somewhat normal life" (Tina's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1995d) or by telling them that they must "accept" memories of child abuse "in order to get well" (Diana's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1995a). They reference the social rules of clinical psychotherapy to account for their willingness to question their autobiographical past. Further, retractors reference norms of psychological trust to explain how the perpetrating therapist established and maintained cognitive authority throughout the interaction.

On the other hand, retractors tell us that they were actually indoctrinated into a "cult." Cults are culturally recognized to be sectarian groups devoted to a singular, deviant worldview. Cult leaders are typically thought to program or brainwash innocent individuals. By describing therapy as a cult, retractors explain their containment in a world of delusions and account for their susceptibility to false memories. Further, they account for their total allegiance to the accused therapeutic authority figure. Finally, they use this vocabulary to explain why they reinvented their identity, rewrote their autobiographical past, and cut off ties to family members (David 1998; Tosh's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1996a; Maria's story, Pendergrast 1995:337) under the guise of enlightenment, all of which is typical of cult victims.

Retractors use a vocabulary of therapy cult to describe the social contexts and lived experience of survivorhood. What they thought was therapy was really "a world of unreality and madness" (Diana's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1995a), "an unreal

world" (Sharon's story, Goldstein and Farmer 1993:229), or "an irrational cult atmosphere" (Brian's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1994c). When retractors reinterpret survivorhood in this way, they depict a clear betrayal of therapeutic trust. They describe how a therapeutic authority figure exploited their psychological vulnerabilities to program false memories of childhood sexual abuse. These memories are then discredited in the contexts of retractorhood, where narrators account for the interactional constraints on their perception of the past.

The False Family—a Homecoming Story

Retractors commonly claim that they once understood survivorhood to be a new family (Davis 2005:539). They further explain that they played the role of dependent child while therapeutic authority figures assumed the role of parents. Referring to her therapist, Maria explains, "Our roles were that she was the mother and I was the child. . . . I agonized over disappointing her" (Pendergrast 1995:338). Olivia recalls, "I think she had kind of a sick relationship with me. She said I reminded her of her daughter. She kept my picture on her desk and my poetry by her bed. She gave me these long hugs" (Pendergrast 1995:330).

Retractors use a vocabulary of false family to define the symbolic character of survivorhood and account for their containment in a world of deception and false consciousness. They claim that therapeutic authority figures worked to undermine and replace their original families, usurp the authority of their parents, and redefine their childhood experiences in the process. Referring to a group therapy environment, Laura remembers, "Everybody in the group was encouraged to divorce their families and make the group their new family" (Pendergrast 1995:334). Similarly, describing life in a psychiatric hospital, Jaye recalls,

Nurses and attendants became mommies and siblings of sorts. The hospital was home and a skewed sense of family was created after I assumed the role of dependent, little-girl patient. . . . Old memories of the father, who raised me by working hard five days a week to provide for our family, quickly receded. . . . Dr. Stratford eagerly stepped in as the emotional Daddy he believed I needed. . . . I became totally dependent upon Daddy Stratford and my hospital family. (Bartha n.d.)

Just as parents are principal authorities in the family who co-reminisce with children during primary socialization (Fivush, Haden, and Reese 1996; Hudson 1990), therapists became the principal authority figures in the new "family," working to redefine the patient's past for specific purposes. Further, retractors describe a strong emotional and cognitive dependence on their "therapy-parents" as they describe their own role as the "obedient" (Lynn's story, Goldstein and Farmer 1993:385), "dependent" (Bartha n.d.), eager to please (Amy's story, *FMSF Newsletter* 1994d), or "frightened" (Sandra's story) child. Retractors tell us that they learned to reject their childhood families and embrace their new survivorhood family. In the process, they claim, therapeutic authority figures implanted false memories of childhood sexual abuse.

Retractors use a vocabulary of false family to account for their containment in a false world of survivorhood, despite the fact that they once embraced this world. While they once thought that survivorhood was homelike, they now reject this notion along with their recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse as they awaken into the “truth” of retractorhood. Such an awakening typically involves a story of homecoming. As retractors reject their “false” family, they commonly seek “reconciliation” (Davis 2005:541; FMSF 2006) with their “real” family, as is evident in the title of Beth’s story, “My Journey Home and Back to Truth” (*FMSF Newsletter* 1998). As Wendy states, “Time will wear away the ‘imposter parents’ and you find the real parents still there just like you truly remember them—and still loving them despite all the therapist’s attempts to destroy that love” (*FMSF Newsletter* 1996c).

Retractorhood and the Symbolic Worlds of Survivorhood

Retractors use these vocabularies of cognitive constraint to account for their past state of false memory with reference to the social dynamics of survivorhood. In each case, they use scripted social processes to reinterpret significant therapeutic experiences and relationships. Like the experience of recovering memories, retracting memories involves important social processes of mnemonic and autobiographical revision. Individuals use these social processes to reconstruct their life stories in the social contexts of retractorhood.

When retractors use vocabularies of cognitive constraint, they highlight the interpretive power that therapeutic authority figures exercise. Clients approach therapists when they are in need of analytic guidance. They trust therapists to mediate their sense of reality and interpret their past experiences during the therapeutic encounter. Retractors tell stories about being deceived by trusted therapeutic authority figures, losing their grip on reality, and awakening into truth in the social contexts of retractorhood. Here, new authority figures provide alternative interpretive perspectives and mnemonic scripts that individuals use to redefine their past experiences. Individuals learn to tell their life stories in a new way as they reject a culture of survivorhood and embrace a *culture of retractorhood*.

CONCLUSION

As survivors and retractors account for their past mnemonic errors and their more recent discovery of truth, they conform to similar patterns of storytelling. Both groups commonly describe awakening from a state of false consciousness and discovering the truth about their lives. Further, both groups typically claim that cognitive authority figures once controlled their ability to attribute meaning to their experiences. Thus both experiences—“recovering” and “retracting” memories—involve important social processes of remembering and storytelling that are more broadly relevant than either particular case. These social processes allow individuals to construct and articulate the mnemonic errors central to psychology’s memory wars.

Symbolic awakenings are narrative tools that facilitate mnemonic and autobiographical revisionism. These scripted discoveries allow individuals to reinterpret their past experiences and reinvent their identities. Moreover, when individuals tell stories about awakening and "seeing the light," they are often rejecting their former social affiliations and embracing a newfound community of "truth." Survivors and retractors use symbolic awakenings to express a sociomental migration out of one "mnemonic community" (Zerubavel 1997:96) and into another. When these storytellers reject their past perceptions or memories and proclaim their discoveries, they awaken into a community of survivors or a community of retractors. In either case, they acquire the comforting sense of *cognitive security* that comes with being accepted by a new community and finding "truth" in the company of like-minded others.

Given the lure of cognitive security and the discovery of truth, both camps in psychology's memory wars should be more aware of their own cognitive authority. When individuals approach survivorhood or retractorhood, they are typically in need of mnemonic guidance. They trust therapeutic authorities to mediate their realities (and their memories) in both the contexts of survivorhood and the contexts of retractorhood. Given these asymmetries of cognitive authority, therapists and researchers should take care not to teach individuals that psychological healing requires one particular version of truth. Instead, they should assist these individuals in exploring the complexity of their memories and experiences without imposing undue bias.

Taking an interactionist and narrative approach to the question of false memories, I have tried to show that the debate between recovered and false memory advocates is unnecessarily antagonistic. The diametrical character of this debate obscures the common social processes at work when individuals account for their mnemonic errors. This rigid dichotomy leaves both therapists and clients with a limited framework for understanding memory and working toward psychological well-being. Instead of waging such an oppositional memory war, both camps should cooperate to study the variety of reasons that people come to doubt their own realities and need mnemonic assistance. Both sides should explore how cognitive authority works in social interaction as individuals struggle to make sense of their lives. Perhaps most important, both camps should be equally concerned with both types of false memories outlined above. Therapists and researchers can be more effective mnemonic guides if they understand how social processes interact with psychic states to render different types of false perceptions and beliefs about the past.

Psychology's memory wars are more than just disputes over allegations of childhood sexual abuse. They are *metamnemonic battles*—distinctly social contests over the legitimacy of memory itself. This dispute takes place at both the micro-interactional level and the macro-cultural level. The players form their opinions (and memories) in therapy sessions and at national conventions. The debate plays out in families and on nationally syndicated television talk shows. Consequently, this memory war provides an ideal subject matter for bridging "process" and "product" oriented

approaches to the study of memory (Beim 2007; Fine and Beim 2007). Further, this battle allows us to compare the cognitive mechanisms operating at both micro-interactional and macro-collective levels of analysis (Beim 2007).

Other mnemonic battles (Zerubavel 1997:98–99) over the nature of traumatic experience and its consequences provide a similar analytic opportunity (Olick 1999). In the case of trauma, individuals build cultures of survivorhood in order to reinterpret their lives and redefine significant past experiences. They define their psychic states and tell their life stories in an effort to vie for the mnemonic authority to redefine significant past events, from war to slavery. Most of the time, their mnemonic claims are controversial. By studying battles to define trauma, we can better understand how cognitive authorities shape the processes and interactions involved with the production of collective memory (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002:46–47). These unique mnemonic conflicts, like psychology's memory wars, link micro-psychological and interactional processes of memory to macro-level mnemonic battles. They provide a rich subject matter for exploring the connections between large-scale cultural processes and the stories we tell about our lives.

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NOTES

1. There is a vast amount of psychological research on this question of memory impairment. All of it is controversial. Briere and Conte (1993) found that slightly more than 59 percent of a clinical sample of childhood sexual abuse victims reported an inability to remember their abuse experiences for a period of time. Williams (1994) found that, of 129 women with hospital documentation of childhood sexual abuse, 38 percent claimed to have no recall of the abuse incident seventeen years later. Other studies suggest that 17 percent of subjects experience partial memory impairment and 16 percent experience complete memory loss (Hermann and Harvey 1997), or 12 percent partial and 19 percent complete (Loftus, Polonsky, and Fulilove 1994). Some have found the closeness of the victim's relationship with the perpetrator to be positively correlated with memory impairment (Freyd 1996; Freyd, DePrince, and Zurbriggen 2001; Williams 1994). While there are some findings to the contrary (Dalenberg 1997; Freyd, DePrince, and Zurbriggen 2001), others have found a lower age of onset (Briere and Conte 1993; Chu et al. 1999; Schooler 2001; van der Kolk and Fisler 1995; Williams 1994) as well as the duration and frequency of abuse (Briere and Conte 1993; Chu et al. 1999; Jacobs et al. 1996; van der Kolk and Fisler 1995) to increase memory impairment. Freyd (1996) argues that mnemonic impairment results from "betrayal trauma," which is rooted in a child's need to preserve relationships necessary for survival. Others (Arnold and Lindsay 2002; Jacobs et al. 1996; Tessler and Nelson 1994) contend that the encoding of traumatic memory is psychologically

distinct from memory associated with nontraumatic situations. Further, some (van der Kolk and Fisler 1995; van der Kolk, Hopper, and Osterman 2001) argue that evolutionarily selected brain mechanisms operate to alter perception and memory encoding in abusive situations so that traumatic memory is fragmented and consequently unavailable for normal autobiographical and narrative recall. Finally, Schooler (2001), preferring the term "discovered" as opposed to "recovered" memories, argues that delayed recall involves acquiring a "meta-awareness" of particular past experiences.

2. For the purposes of this article, it is necessary to avoid essentializing notions of truth and falsehood in survivor and retractor accounts. Therefore, whenever I refer to the "truth" or a "falsehood" directly, I enclose these words in quotation marks to remind the reader that I am analyzing autobiographical narratives, not the actual veracity of the claims being made. When I explicitly refer to the narrator's understanding, perception, claim, description, or account of truth and falsehood, I do not use quotation marks.
3. I use the term *self-identified* here to note that many individuals who tell stories about childhood sexual abuse are making unsubstantiated claims. Most of the survivors I refer to are therefore self-identified, although I drop this explicit qualifier throughout the remainder of the article.
4. Building on Martin's (2002) extensive discussion of cognitive authority and its relationship to "the constraint of belief systems" in a variety of intentional communities, I am referring to two different dimensions of cognitive authority. On the one hand, I am specifically referring to how cognitive authority figures enforce scripted narrative accounts in particular social contexts. On the other hand, I am exploring how cognitive authority figures serve as narrative resources for storytellers as they explain their prior state of "false," or constrained, consciousness and their present awakening into a "true" belief. Cognitive authority is thus both a constructive force and a descriptive resource. Cognitive authority figures teach individuals to derive particular meanings from their experiences and interpret their lives in patterned ways. These figures are also often central characters in the stories we tell about our lives, especially when explaining our mnemonic discoveries and accounting for our rejection of previously held beliefs.
5. These stories are all publicly available. Because some online authors publish anonymously and others sign their stories with only a first name, I use pseudonyms (first name only) for the sake of consistency when citing these cases throughout this article. When the story was previously published in print (e.g., a book or newsletter) or a copyright was noted online, I use the author's first name when available (otherwise, I use a pseudonym) and cite the source directly.
6. Many of the stories posted on StopBadTherapy.com originally appeared in the other retractor sources I analyzed.
7. Schooler (2001:118) states, "Although individuals may engage in . . . deliberative ruminations about the prior degree of forgetting, it also seems likely that people's immediate *phenomenology at the time of recollection* may also serve as an important factor in their assessment of their prior forgetting. If individuals experience a marked sense of 'aha' or surprise when they recall an event . . . they are likely to attribute this surprise to having just discovered a previously forgotten memory."
8. I use the term *adult authority figure* to mean an ideal-typical adult who can exercise a socializing power over children. Such a role is often filled by a parent but might as easily be filled by an aunt or an uncle, a teacher, or a priest. For children, such adults are authorities who define right and wrong, provide answers to questions, and give meaning to the unknown. I am therefore specifically focusing on claims of childhood sexual abuse that are marked by a reference to an asymmetry of cognitive authority typical of such adult-child relationships. Further, it must be noted that not all cases of remembering and forgetting necessarily involve cognitive authority, such as when a victim represses a memory of childhood sexual abuse for the purpose of survival (see Freyd 1996). Finally, the controversy involving childhood sexual abuse and memory pertains specifically to accused parents or other significant adult family members (see FMSF 2006).

9. Notably, such a vocabulary of cognitive constraint takes on meaning within a larger cultural environment in which “playing” with a child’s genitalia is regarded as sexually abusive. In other times and places, it is a perfectly normal and widespread tradition (see Aries 1962: 100–106).
10. Self-identified survivor, conversation with author.
11. Davis (2005) discusses retractor narratives in great detail. Focusing on “the identity functions and social consequences” (p. 529) of retractor accounts, he discusses many of the themes outlined in this section. Building on his extensive discussion, my aim is to highlight the sociocognitive dimensions of these scripted vocabularies in order to emphasize their formal similarities to survivor accounts.
12. I use the term *therapeutic authority figure* to refer to an individual or group that exercises an interpretive and diagnostic authority over others in a psychotherapeutic context. Notably, such figures do not have to be licensed clinicians. They are, more generally, agents of memory who have greater access to the means of cultural production (Olick 1999:338–39) in the contexts of survivorhood.

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