

# Deconstructing the redemptive power of 'bearing witness'

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A new comparative study finds genocidal legacies are not experienced as trauma across cultures.

The experience of genocide as transmitted trauma may not be universal, according to new [ethnographic research](#) published in [Current Anthropology](#).

In the fields of human rights and [memory studies](#), giving testimony about one's personal experience of genocide is believed to be both a [moral duty](#) and a psychological imperative for the wellbeing of the individual and the persecuted group to which she belongs. Accordingly, the [coping strategies](#) proposed to [victims](#) of genocide tend to be rather uniform: tell your story and do not let the violence you suffered be forgotten.

The author of this study offers two persuasive case studies that suggest that this universalizing approach to genocide is misguided. In her interviews with Jewish-Israeli children of Holocaust survivors and Cambodian-Canadians whose parents were persecuted at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, Carol Kidron found that virtually all subjects rejected the pathologizing construct of transmitted PTSD.

The author's research reveals key differences in the genocidal legacies of Cambodian-Canadian and Jewish-Israeli trauma descendants. While the Jewish-Israeli subjects felt that they bore some emotional scars that were passed on by their parents, they opposed the idea that they have been

afflicted by these inherited traces of the Holocaust. In fact, in the Jewish-Israeli cultural context, these markers of emotional difference may serve instead as an empowering way to carry on their parents' memory. In great contrast, Cambodian-Canadians not only resist the stigma of trauma, but also insist that the genocide has not left them psycho-socially impaired in any way. Instead of remembering tragedy, the Cambodian-Canadian subjects appealed to Karma and subscribed to Buddhist forward-looking attitudes.

Despite their differences, both accounts defy the tropes of victimization and trauma that pervade scholarship on genocide and humanitarian practice. The author argues that religious worldviews and cultural values frame responses to trauma. Cultural paradigms may valorize or marginalize the importance of remembrance, and the author calls for scholars and humanitarian workers to take into account the diversity of cultural frameworks for remembrance when dealing with descendants of [genocide](#) victims.

**More information:** Kidron, Carol A. "Alterity and the Particular Limits of Universalism: Comparing Jewish-Israeli Holocaust and Canadian-Cambodian Genocide Legacies." *Current Anthropology* 53:5.

Provided by University of Chicago

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