

[Home](#)[Up](#)[Doc List](#)

99-123 Doc

**Culture and the Politics of Signification:
The Case of Child Sexual Abuse.
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Social Problems
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Social problems may be framed in a number of ways, and social actors often struggle to imbue discussions of these issues with different meanings and associations (Edelman 1988; Gamson 1992; Gamson and Modigliani 1987; Gamson and Lasch 1983; Gusfield 1981; Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). While these symbolic contests have been the subject of much research, topics characterized as "valence issues" are seen as immune from such contestation. Valence issues are defined as those which elicit "a single, strong, fairly uniform emotional response and do not have an adversarial quality" (Nelson 1984:27; see also Campbell et al. 1966; Stokes and DiIulio 1993). In contrast, "position issues" are those that engender "alternative and highly conflictual responses" (Nelson 1984:27). This distinction is used for both descriptive and explanatory purposes, as analysts often attribute the absence of conflict to the valence quality of the issue itself.

This article suggests that the conceptual distinction between valence and position issues obscures the role of ideological struggle in generating social controversy, as well as the complex and contradictory nature of culture that makes these efforts possible. The multiplicity of images, themes, and sentiments also makes possible the creation of entirely new interpretive frameworks through which social issues may be apprehended. Both the presence and absence of struggles over the signification, then, are best understood as the product of agency. This argument is illustrated by an analysis of media discourse on what has been called a "preeminent valence issue" (Nelson 1984:27): child sexual abuse.

Like other valence issues, this social problem is not characterized by defenders and opponents; there is no "pro-child abuse" lobby. The framing of this issue has nonetheless been vigorously contested in recent years, and public discourse on the issue is clearly characterized by the existence of "alternative and highly conflictual responses." While all participants in this conversation condemn "true" cases of abuse, they nonetheless seek to imbue the topic with very different sets of meanings and associations. The vigorous and often adversarial debate over the meaning and significance of claims of abuse indicates that so-called valence issues may also be subject to contestation.