The ritual abuse of children

A critical perspective

Kay McLeod and Chris Goddard

The first section of this paper explores the 'discovery' of organised ritual abuse and reviews the literature with particular attention to the developing knowledge base, the question of credibility, the silencing of debate, and the ongoing research.

The second section considers the central research issues. The question of definition is discussed and the adoption of 'organised ritual abuse' as a working definition is proposed. The four aspects of organised ritual abuse, which analysis of the literature suggests are its key defining features, are then discussed. Finally, consideration is given to the importance of values in this field of research.

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THE 'DISCOVERY' OF ORGANISED RITUAL ABUSE

Public and professional awareness of claims relating to organised ritual abuse developed during the 1980s in the context of growing community concern about child sexual abuse. As has been the case with public recognition of all categories of child abuse, the emergence of this material into public consciousness was represented and perceived as a new 'discovery' (Tate 1991; Sinason 1994; Ross 2000).

The establishment of the reality of any form of child abuse in the public mind has always required the presence of a supportive environment (Herman 1992). Only with the combined support of the media and the medical profession was child physical abuse brought to the attention of the public (Costin, Karger & Stoesz 1996; Goddard 1996). Only in the context of the women's movement was the sexual abuse of children brought to the attention of the public (Herman 1992). So, too, with organised ritual abuse. Organised ritual abuse was 'discovered' during the 1980s when these forces combined to endorse its recognition, and disappeared from public awareness when various forces withdrew their support and actively campaigned against its recognition (Ross 1995; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001; Faller 2003; Kitzinger 2003).

THE DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE BASE

During the period in which the organised ritual abuse of children received public attention and acknowledgment, much was discovered and rediscovered about the nature of this form of child abuse. It was documented that, throughout history, some groups in some societies had engaged in practices of organised ritual sacrifice and orgy involving occult belief systems as a means of establishing group cohesion and political hierarchy (Katchen & Sakheim 1992; Kahr 1994; Ross 1995). Research also suggested that such practices were reported to be still occurring within modern society (Tate 1991; Sinason 1994; Ross 1995). Organised ritual abuse was said to have occurred in religious and childcare institutions, criminal networks, multigenerational families, isolated communities, elite power groups and secret societies (Tate 1991; Ross 1995; Scott 2001).

Researchers also reported the accounts of survivors who recalled their experiences of ritual abuse (Smith 1993; Gould 1995) and studied the impact of ritual abuse on the

individuals subjected to these practices (Bloom 1994; Goodwin 1994b; Young 1992; Ross 1995). As with accounts of childhood sexual abuse, such accounts, although long familiar to the field of psychiatry, had previously been dismissed as fictitious (Goodwin 1994a). However, as the established professions identified the links between trauma, torture, and dissociated identity states, these professions began listening in new ways to the accounts of children and adults reporting experiences of organised ritual abuse (Herman 1992; Sinason 1994; Ross 1995; van der Kolk, McFarlane & Weisaeth 1996). A strong public and professional response to this perceived problem of organised ritual abuse was developed through legal reform and action, medical research and classification, child protection initiatives, therapeutic initiatives, media publicity, interdisciplinary cooperation, and a general community capacity to accept and address the issue of organised ritual abuse (Smith 1993; Sinason 1994; Ross 1995; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Faller 2003).

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THE QUESTION OF CREDIBILITY

The receptive environment

As noted above, the women's movement together with social work practitioners succeeded in establishing child sexual abuse as a reality in the professional and public spheres in the 1970s (Herman 1992; Goddard 1996; Scott 2001). There was both a receptive environment and the development of new techniques for the identification and treatment of post traumatic stress disorders.

The medical profession was influential in this development and brought its newly informed understanding of the trauma-based aetiology of the dissociative disorders to its work with patients reporting ritual abuse experience. Associations for the treatment of Dissociative Identity Disorder were formed and these professional associations were very much concerned with the discussion of ritual abuse accounts in the context of the dissociative identity disorders (Ross 1995; Noblitt & Perskin 2000).

Criminal investigations into organised ritual abuse were undertaken in several countries (Tate 1991; Faller 2003) and the laws of statutory limitation were changed to ensure that cases involving the recovered memory of abuse were not placed outside the requisite period (Scott 2001). The media actively supported the view that organised ritual abuse was a major social concern (Tate 1991; La Fontaine 1998; Noblitt & Perskin 2000).

A questioning environment

A number of factors later contributed to the development of an environment which questioned the existence of organised ritual abuse as a form of child abuse.

Sensationalised accounts

Evangelical approaches from both fundamentalist churches and some practitioner bases damaged the credibility of these accounts (Tate 1991; Ross 1995; La Fontaine 1998; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001). An element of hysteria arose in even the more traditional professions which also damaged the credibility of accounts.

Psychological and social resistance

The natural human response to such horror is to not want to know about it.

> The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness (Herman 1992:1).

Private groups formed to actively campaign against the recognition of organised ritual abuse (Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001; Faller 2003; Kitzinger 2003). Public institutions also took an active role in disputing the credibility of accounts of organised ritual abuse (Tate 1991; Noblitt & Perskin 2000). The media appeared to be less sympathetic and acted to discredit the recognition of this category of abuse (Tate 1991; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001; Faller 2003; Kitzinger 2003).

THE SILENCING OF DEBATE

The development of knowledge within this field became increasingly problematic as the focus of attention was moved from concern for the protection of children to concern for the protection of adults. The environment became increasingly hostile towards the reception of such accounts and, as had previously occurred with other forms of child abuse (for example, sexual abuse (Mudaly & Goddard in press)), these accounts were relegated to the category of fantasy (Tate 1994; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001; Faller 2003).

Pre-eminence of the legal perspective

Perhaps the most damaging impact on the credibility of ritual abuse accounts was the growing pre-eminence of the legal perspective. Increasingly, accounts of organised ritual abuse were submitted to the proof requirements of criminal law and this was accepted as the measure of validity. The knowledge base of other professions was discounted as precedence was granted to the perspective of law

enforcement (Tate 1991; Noblitt & Perskin 2000). In consequence, professional associations withdrew their support and workers in the field of organised ritual abuse were subjected to professional opprobrium, media harassment, and the ever present risk of legal reprisal (Tate 1991; Ross 1995; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Faller 2003; Graham 2003). Where aspects of organised ritual abuse existed in criminal cases, these were not included in the prosecution case for fear of prejudicing the outcome (Goddard 1994; Ross 1995). Where cases which contained most of the features of organised ritual abuse were successfully prosecuted, they were not reported as such (Tate 1994; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001).

A discourse of disbelief

Throughout the 1990s, the issue of credibility continued to dominate the literature and developed into what Scott (2001:34) has aptly described as a 'discourse of disbelief'.

Radical disbelief

The credibility of accounts of organised ritual abuse was undermined by the emphasis in some of the literature on the provision of alternative explanations for these accounts. In this literature, accounts of organised ritual abuse are frequently attributed to some form of hysteria – favoured explanations including epidemics of moral panic; rampant fundamentalist evangelism; overzealous child protection workers and police officers; incompetent therapists; unreliable children; and suggestible adults (Tate 1991; Scott 2001; Faller 2003). The underlying assumption in this literature is that such accounts are unacceptable on prima facie grounds and the effect of such an emphasis is to render invalid all accounts of organised ritual abuse.

In this context, it seems important to note that this position of fundamental disbelief is most conspicuously present in the Australian, UK and US context. By contrast, South Africa has a very different belief system operating, assigns specialist police units to the investigation of such cases (Els & Jonker 2000), and supports academic scholarship in the area (McVeigh 2002). Elsewhere, ongoing professional research and interest suggests that fundamental disbelief is not the position of Scotland Yard (McVeigh 2002), the UK Department of Health (Laurance 2000), and professionals in the fields of trauma and dissociation (van der Hart, Boon & Jansen 1997; Sauer 2002; Graham 2003; Faller 2003).

Prejudicial reporting

Despite the already well established literature on the nature of traumatic memory and dissociation (Herman 1992; Ross 1995; van der Kolk et al. 1996), the 'false memory' claim dominated much of the literature and contributed greatly to the 'discourse of disbelief'. Debate about 'false memory' was used as a means of discrediting all claims of organised ritual abuse (Ross 1995; Freyd 1996; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001; Faller 2003; Kitzinger 2003).

Another mechanism employed in this silencing of debate was the renaming of ritual abuse as 'satanic ritual abuse' (Scott 2001). Such restrictive naming diverted attention from other societal links which were being reported in the context of organised ritual abuse accounts.

The much repeated and demonstrably false claim (Tate 1991; Ross 1995; Noblitt & Perskin 2000) that, despite rigorous and lengthy investigation, no forensic evidence of organised ritual abuse practices could be found was also highly prejudicial in its effect. The credibility of accounts of organised ritual abuse was also greatly diminished by the persistent focus on the most extreme acts of abuse in a manner which decontextualised these accounts and failed to draw on the established literature support for the occurrence of such acts of abuse (Sakheim & Devine 1992; Goodwin 1994a; Sinason 1994; Ross 1995).

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THE ONGOING RESEARCH

Despite this strong oppositional environment, research into organised ritual abuse has continued and some new research directly addressing the issue is being published (Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001; Faller 2003; Beardsley 2003).

The knowledge base is multidisciplinary and the literature has drawn on research findings from several related fields of research. The relevance of the trauma literature in general is well documented (Herman 1992; Goodwin 1994a; Ross 1995; van der Kolk et al. 1996; Cassidy 2002; Achimov & Ferrari 2003). The pertinence of the literature on killing and warfare, on terrorism and hostage experience is being increasingly identified (Herman 1992; Ross 2000; Stanley & Goddard 2002; Cassidy 2002; Kraft 2002). The literature on memory and dissociation continues to inform research into organised ritual abuse (van der Kolk et al. 1996; Ross 1997; Goodwin & Attias 1999; Ross 2000; Kraft 2002; Delphi Centre & Cannon Institute 2003).

A relationship between organised ritual abuse and other forms of organised child abuse is now suggested (Bright & McVeigh 2001; Scott 2001). Other research is providing evidence in support of some of the most shocking claims relating to the practice of organised ritual abuse (Laurance 2000; McVeigh 2002; Wilson 2004).

An informed reading of the media also continues to provide support for the accounts of the survivors of organised ritual abuse (McVeigh 2002; Mega 2002; Agency Reporter 2003; Agency Reporter 2004). Whilst rarely identifying the ritual abuse elements of a case, the media itself frequently reports documented cases of organised child abuse which are very suggestive of organised ritual abuse (Davies 1998; Dunn 2000; Helm 2001; Wilson 2004; Ford 2004).

THE RESEARCH ISSUES

It is to be expected that there will be vigorous debate in an area as controversial as the organised ritual abuse of children. Academic writing on the topic has reflected both the complexity of the topic and its controversial nature. The literature is diverse in quality and needs to be studied with care.

Of particular concern is the lack of scholarship evident in much of the writing disputing the occurrence of organised ritual abuse (Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Ross 1995; Scott 2001). The advocacy literature can also be non-scholarly in its approach, perhaps most notably when written from a fundamentalist and evangelical viewpoint (Burrell 1994; Ross 1995; Scott 2001). Interestingly, both this evangelical advocacy literature and the hostile oppositional literature consistently replace the generic term 'ritual abuse' with the much narrower and much more emotive term 'satanic ritual abuse' and in so doing distort the discussion of this topic (Scott 2001). The more recent research moves beyond the 'discourse of disbelief' about organised ritual abuse to study of the topic itself (Scott 2001; Faller 2003; Beardsley 2003; Graham 2003).

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THE QUESTION OF DEFINITION

Whilst we need to be aware of the problems which may arise when we categorise child abuse (Goddard 1996), it is also necessary to have clarity about the forms of abuse we are 'discovering' so that our knowledge is not lost. Thus, although aspects of sexual abuse are clearly physical, we place sexual abuse in a separate category to physical abuse because of its significantly different aspects. So, too, with the organised ritual abuse of children; there is an added dimension to such abuse and it is this distinctive dimension which research has attempted to define.

The importance of naming

'Ritual abuse'

The original term 'ritual abuse' was coined to describe a distinct category of organised child abuse (Goodwin 1994b: 34). The original term was understood to refer to the ongoing systematic abuse of children in organised networks practising violent occult rituals. Throughout the literature it is clear that the term 'ritual abuse' is still universally understood to refer to this category of abuse (Fraser 1997; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001). Despite the apparent aptness of this term, it has not been readily adopted as the descriptive term for this category of abuse.

'Satanic ritual abuse'

This term appears in the literature as part of the 'discourse of disbelief'. The term has been used extensively in this context despite the literature discussion which demonstrates the problematic nature of its usage (Goodwin 1994b; Sinason 1994; Scott 2001). The term is too narrow for adoption as the name for this category of abuse. The political nature of 'naming' is now well understood (Daly 1974; Goddard 1994; Goddard 2002; Kitzinger 2003) and the development of knowledge in this area has been hindered by the prejudicial replacement of the original term 'ritual abuse' with the term 'satanic ritual abuse'.

'Satanist abuse'

Sinason proposed this term in an endeavour to avoid 'the assumption of the objective reality of Satan' (1994:4) and also to emphasise 'the people active as perpetrators rather than the belief system *per se*' (Scott 2001:38). Whilst this term may be preferable for the satanic sub-category of ritual abuse, it also is too narrow to be used as a name for the overall category.

'Ritualistic abuse'

> Abuse that occurs in a context linked to some symbols or group activity that have a religious, magical or supernatural connotation, and where the invocation of these symbols or activities, repeated over time, is used to frighten and intimidate the children (Finkelhor, Meyer Williams & Burns 1988:59).

Finkelhor's 1988 definition is well regarded. It too distances itself from any 'assumption of the objective reality of Satan' (Sinason 1994:4) yet manages to retain the 'ritual' aspect without the reduction which Sinason's 'satanist abuse' still includes.

Finkelhor's definition, however, seems to fall short on two counts at least. It does not capture the full horror of the reported accounts, and it reduces the ritual aspect of the abuse to the intention 'to frighten and intimidate the children'.

'Sadistic abuse'

> The term 'sadistic abuse' is proposed to designate extreme adverse experiences which include sadistic sexual and physical abuse, acts of torture, overcontrol and terrorisation, induction into violence, ritual involvements and malevolent emotional abuse (Goodwin 1994b: 33).

Goodwin's recommendation is very persuasive. She argues that this form of abuse should be located not in 'the history of religions' but rather in 'the history of family violence, political torture, crime and sexual perversion' (Goodwin 1994b:35). She points out that the term has been established in the medical literature since the work of Krafft-Ebing in the nineteenth century and shows the relevance of this already established literature to the modern accounts of organised ritual abuse (1994b:33-44). Goodwin suggests that the term 'ritual abuse' should be reserved for a subcategory of 'sadistic abuse' in which 'pseudo-religious or cult elements dominate' (1994b: 35).

Goodwin's position is that focus on:

> the presence of extreme abusive behaviours allows systematic data collection about such behaviours without attributing a motivational system as the term 'ritual abuse' tends to do (1994b:33).

However, the imputation of motivation seems to be intrinsic to the term 'sadism' and is certainly part of Krafft-Ebing's original definition:

> The experience of sexual or pleasurable sensations ... produced by acts of cruelty, as bodily punishment inflicted on one's own body or witnessed in others, be they animals or human beings. It may also consist of innate desires to humiliate, hurt, wound, or even destroy others (in Goodwin 1994b: 35).

'Organised abuse'

Research into the organised abuse of children was virtually non-existent until the late 1980s (Scott 2001:30). As accounts of ritual abuse could not be fitted into a simple framework of intra-familial child abuse, research began to address these accounts in the context of the organised abuse of children. Bibby (1996) suggests that 'ritual abuse' might best be categorised as a subcategory of 'organised abuse'.

'Organised sadistic abuse'

Cotton (2000:1) credits Jean Goodwin with the introduction of the term 'organised sadistic abuse'. The term retains the advantages of 'sadistic abuse' whilst incorporating the organised aspect which is so central to the accounts of organised ritual abuse. However, it cannot serve as a substitute name for this form of abuse as it contains no acknowledgment of the key aspect of 'ritual' which is so integral to these accounts.

Although our society continues to fail to protect many children from abuse, it is no longer in outright denial of the reality of most forms of child abuse.

A working name

A comparison of these very diverse definitions indicates that, whilst there are several key defining aspects of organised ritual abuse, most definitions do not incorporate all of these aspects. Thus, an emphasis which reduces accounts of ritual abuse to 'satanic ritual abuse' or which discounts any occult aspects of ritual abuse is manifestly not sufficient to the task of categorising organised ritual abuse. Scott (2001) advises against the imposition of a fixed definition at this early stage of research and herself simply uses the informal expression of 'organised and ritual' when discussing the organised aspect of this abuse.

'Ritual abuse', the term first coined for this category of abuse (Goodwin 1994a), has much to recommend it. It captures what is described and this term is in fact generally understood to distinguish this specific form of abuse. It is also redolent with meaning and thus helps to capture that which is intrinsic to this form of abuse but which is not so easily described.

We suggest the adoption of the term 'organised ritual abuse' as a working name for this form of abuse. This term allows for the incorporation of 'organised ritual abuse' as a sub-category of either 'organised abuse' or 'sadistic abuse'. It also ensures that there is no premature secularisation of these accounts.

THE DEFINING ASPECTS

Despite the controversy which has dominated research in the area, an analysis of the literature shows that there are certain key features which are generally ascribed to this category of abuse. These characteristics are herein outlined but require closer and more detailed definition.

Extreme violence

As reported, the practices are those of sadistic abuse and include 'torture, confinement, extreme threat and domination, overlapping physical and sexual abuses, and multiple victim or multiple perpetrator patterns of abuse'

(Goodwin 1994b:33). Cotton describes organised ritual abuse as an 'organised form of severe sexual, physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse' (Cotton 2000:1).

Altered mind states

Research has identified the close link between these practices and the production of altered mind states (Herman 1992; Sinason 1994; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001). The technology of mind alteration has a long history and is demonstrated in the initiation rites, religious customs, and military practices of many cultures (Herman 1992; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Ross 2000).

The systemic organisation

As with sexual abuse, organised ritual abuse cannot be marginalised as a fringe form of abuse occurring outside normal society; rather, reports invariably demonstrate its location in and reliance upon the established institutions of the host society (Bibby 1996; van der Hart et al. 1997; Itzin 2001; Scott 2001; Faller 2003; Ford 2004; Wilson 2004).

The occult ritual aspect

This is the aspect of organised ritual abuse which has been most sensationalised and around which much of the 'discourse of disbelief' has been conducted. There is an established literature which demystifies this aspect of organised abuse by placing it in the context of the historical development of traumatic ritual processes for the purposeful production of altered states of mind (Katchen & Sakheim 1992; Ross 1995; Noblitt & Perskin 2000; Scott 2001).

THE APPLICATION OF VALUES

The construction of knowledge

Recognition of the value base underlying research positions and community responses is now well understood to be an essential component in the development of knowledge bases in any field of research (Gordon 1980; Breckenridge 1999; Schmuttermaier & Veno 1999; Scott 2001). It is essential to recognise the role which values, both societal and individual, play in the development of responses to all forms of child abuse. Research needs to make explicit the values which underlie any given response to reports of organised ritual abuse. Value positions have affected the development of knowledge in this area in several key aspects:

The legitimisation of knowledge

In this context, it becomes important to consider the value we place on different forms of knowledge. Apart from the accounts of survivors, we cannot develop our understanding in this area unless due weight is given to the experiential knowledge base of competent therapists and other professionals working in the field. In the course of working with the post-traumatic stress encountered in survivors of childhood sexual abuse or war-related trauma, therapists encounter the raw material of the original trauma and thus develop a knowledge base which is experientially informed (Herman 1992; Goodwin & Attias 1999). Competent therapy requires the therapist to have the capacity to endure such material. The literature which draws on such experience is very readily distinguishable and is uniquely valuable when it is presented in a scholarly manner (Herman 1992; Goodwin 1994b; Hale & Sinason 1994; Nijenhuis & van der Hart 1999).

In order to meet our duty of care towards the children who are abused, and towards the survivors who continue to struggle with the effects of abuse, a continuing emphasis on the open development of knowledge in this area is essential.

Belief and disbelief

Although our society continues to fail to protect many children from abuse, it is no longer in outright denial of the reality of most forms of child abuse. What is it then about accounts of organised ritual abuse which provoke such extreme denial?

Social recognition of the organised abuse of children is only very recent and research into this area only commenced in the 1980s. There is still resistance to any notion of organised abuse. Abuse is almost invariably put down to the action of pathological individuals. For example, the recognition of the pervasive nature of sexual abuse within religious institutions is still contained within this model of individual fault. Even now, when the systemic nature of this abuse is identified, there is no presentation of this as other than a failure to deal with the individual perpetrator (Goddard & Liddell 2002; Porter 2003). Similarly, the organisational aspects of child pornography and prostitution are never placed in their full social context but are presented as the actions of individual perpetrators who are presented as acting alone or in small groups which operate simply for the purpose of 'sharing' (Davies & Vasager 2001; Butler 2002; Kraft 2002).

Even where there is more community awareness of the organised nature of abuse (for example, the international commercial trade around sexual exploitation), such organisation is seen to be attributable to the world of the 'other'. Hence, it can be dismissed by virtue of its belonging to some distanced group such as the underclass, the criminal world, or any other dissociated or disadvantaged group. The case being heard (at the time of writing) in France, involving 66 adults and 45 child victims, is an example (Henley 2005).

CONCLUSION

Whilst the task of protecting children from organised ritual abuse is the responsibility of all members of the community, the professions associated with child protection and with psychotherapy have a very particular responsibility in this area.

In order to meet our duty of care towards the children who are abused, and towards the survivors who continue to struggle with the effects of abuse, a continuing emphasis on the open development of knowledge in this area is essential. Such a response requires professional competence in relation to both the politics and psychology of denial (Miller 1990; Herman 1992). Such a critical response also makes considerable demands upon the personal integrity and psychological health of the worker in this field. A key human defence is to close our minds to material which threatens to overwhelm us (Miller 1991; Herman 1992; McFarlane & van der Kolk 1996; Martin 2003). It is essential that children who have been abused receive our full attention. ❖

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