

The organised abuse of children in rural England

The response of Social Services

PART ONE

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There are a number of controversies raging in the world of child protection. Three in particular have attracted attention in recent months. There is the issue of the 'repressed' or 'false' memories of adults recalling sexual abuse in childhood. This topic has received extensive coverage in professional journals (see, for example, Neale, 1994 for a summary) and in the broader media (Wyndham, 1994).

Once again, the very label given to the problem defines the debate, as indeed has been the case since modern interest in child abuse was prompted by Kempe's (1962) work. It is interesting to note that 'false memory syndrome' is now the term used by some to counter claims of abuse in childhood. As Neale points out (1994:17) the term has 'no medical validity', but the use of the word 'syndrome' perhaps suggests such a feature.

Professionals working with those (both adults and children) who have been abused, are concerned that the use of such a label will lead to victims being disbelieved, a state of affairs that was widespread until recently and some would claim still exists. On the other hand, according to Wyndham, 'unlocking hidden memories' or 'implanting false ones' has become big business in the USA. Therapists evidently advertise in the American press claiming that they will 'unlock traumas behind personality disorders' (Wyndham, 1994:3).

In Britain, considerable debate has been caused by the release of a book entitled *The Female Sexual Abuse of*

Children: The Ultimate Taboo (Elliott, 1993). This book has led some to claim that the work will detract from the issue that it is men who are the perpetrators of most sexual abuse. Others suggest Elliott's book will assist in ensuring that all victims will receive the understanding and treatment that they require (see, for example, Button, 1994).

The third controversial issue is the problem of 'ritual', 'satanic' or 'organised' abuse. It is this subject that will form the basis of this and the next 'Not the Last Word'.

Media coverage of this topic was impossible to avoid in Britain in mid-1994. On the one side was the release of Valerie Sinason's (1994) *Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse*. The 'blurb' on the cover of this text refers to the work of the 'early pioneers' in the field of child abuse who were disbelieved, and draws the parallel with the experiences of those disclosing abuse in 'organised settings'. It is interesting to observe that many of the contributors to this book use the terms 'ritual', 'ritualistic' and 'ritual organised' abuse rather than the 'satanist abuse' used in the title.

The event that attracted most attention to the subject of such abuse, however, was the release of Professor Jean La Fontaine's (1994) report commissioned by the UK Department of Health entitled *The Extent and Nature of Organised and Ritual Abuse: Research Findings*. This surprisingly brief (36 pages) and lightly-referenced report suggests that the problem of 'organised' abuse is 'not large in terms of numbers' and that 'ritual' or 'satanic' cases make up a

mere 8% of such cases (La Fontaine 1994: 30). La Fontaine found evidence of three cases of 'ritual, not satanic, abuse' but no substantiated cases of 'satanic or satanist' abuse.

As I have noted elsewhere (Goddard 1994), La Fontaine's work gives rise to questions about the definitions and the methodologies used in such studies. La Fontaine's findings were seized upon by some politicians and the media to prove that social workers had got it all wrong again. At the same time, however, *Child Abuse Review* carried a major article by Joan Coleman (1994) describing the presenting features of adults who had been the victims of 'satanist ritual abuse'.

The controversies about organised abuse (as I prefer to call it) 'repressed' or 'false' memories, and women as perpetrators of sexual abuse are not mutually exclusive. Sinason's book, for example, includes a short but interesting chapter on false allegations (Adshedd, 1994). Such debates are essential to our understanding of child abuse. The danger lies in 'unchecked' polarisation (Berliner & Loftus, 1992).

My preference for the term 'organised' abuse rather than 'satanic' or 'ritual' arises from a number of concerns. Firstly, some of the definitions used appear to me to be impossible to apply (Goddard 1992). This is a problem with the definition in La Fontaine's research. According to her report, 'satanic' or 'satanist' abuse is that the physical and/or sexual abuse of children '...is part of rites directed to a magical or religious objective' (1994:30). The

intent or objective of such abuse is not always apparent and may never be so. Indeed, it is possible that different perpetrators involved in the same abuse may have different motives or intentions.

Secondly, there is a concern that we will lose sight of what is really going on if we use terms that are less than precise. It is now clear, for example, that some perpetrators of abuse are attracted to particular professions, such as teaching, social work or the priesthood because of the access such roles allow to children. Cases such as that described in this journal of the teacher who is alleged to have physically and sexually abused children (Goddard 1993a; 1993b), should not be described as 'educational' abuse because it is perpetrated by a teacher, or because it took place in a classroom, or even if the child molester were to claim that he (or she) had been 'educating' the victim, as indeed some perpetrators so claim.

Our views about child abuse have needed, and will continue to need, constant revision.... we must remind ourselves that the 'truth' is what happened in the individual case at hand, not what we believe or disbelieve.

Thirdly, the very existence of child abuse has required a 'suspension of disbelief' (to borrow Coleridge's phrase) on the part of many in the broader community. Few of us can escape criticism that we have been reluctant to see or believe what happens to some children. Our views about child abuse have needed, and will continue to need, constant revision. As Berliner and Loftus insist, we must remind ourselves that the 'truth' is what happened in the individual case at hand, not what we believe or disbelieve (1992:577).

We can learn a great deal from the experiences of others. The interview reported below was recorded before Professor La Fontaine's report was released. The interviewee is now a manager in a British Social Services Department. Both he and his Department have requested anonymity in

this article for reasons that will become clear in the course of the discussion.

Interview

CG: Would you start by outlining the details of this case?

SSM: The case began with two young girls who were aged 5 and 3 years when they were removed on Place of Safety Orders from the care of their mother following medical examination which revealed sexual abuse. Medical examinations were set up because the girls had claimed they had been sexually abused. Interviews with the Police and Social Services confirmed that. Subsequently the girls, over a period of time while in foster care, revealed aspects of sexual abuse which could be said to have a ritualistic or satanic symbolism to them. What the girls were saying was that they went to parties at which the person named as their grandfather chopped the heads off chickens and smeared their faces in the blood; dancing took place over live snakes (the grandparents indeed kept snakes); clothes were removed at the parties; one child was required to 'blow up' the grandfather's penis, and that he ejaculated in her mouth. One child claimed to have masturbated her grandfather and, on one occasion, she bit his penis, it bled, and he called her a "shithead". The grandfather put his penis in one girl's vagina, the mother put her fingers in the girls' vaginas and bottoms, various indecent acts took place in their presence between adults, mother took pictures of various indecent acts, other adults were involved apart from mother, as well as mother's co-habitee and father.

CG: When did the media get hold of this case?

SSM: The media didn't get hold of the case for quite some time. Approximately a year after the girls' admission to care, another child was born, which Social Services removed at birth on a Place of Safety Order, and added to the Wardship proceedings. The Wardship was finalised in the County Council's favour with Care Orders and leave to place for adoption. Then in 1991, a further child was born and that's when the media became involved.

CG: So in effect this was the mother's fourth child when the media became involved.

SSM: The media became involved when the mother was pregnant. The mother went to the media because she was aware that we would want to remove the fourth child. The paper took up the story and ran a series of articles.

CG: In regard to the media coverage itself, what attitude did the newspaper take towards the case and towards the mother's story?

SSM: The newspaper accepted mother's story that she and her family were innocent victims of a bureaucratic social services organisation who were nothing better than baby snatchers. The paper ran very sympathetic stories about this young couple who had led blameless lives and been the victims of 'scurrilous evidence' from a Social Services Department, which at best was mistaken, and at worst was made up by the Department. And it was illustrated with sympathetic pictures of the parents in a soft focus, rather like honeymoon pictures. The article also concentrated on local people, leaders of the community, who were given poor facts about the case and asked to comment on it. Almost without exception they joined in clamouring against the Social Services Department, people like the local vicar, County councillors, a local MP, who on the basis of what they were told (which was factually inaccurate) came out against the Social Services Department and demanded an inquiry. The attention rose when the baby was born and we removed the child from hospital shortly after birth on a Place of Safety Order. The Press were present at the hospital, trying to photograph the social workers removing the baby.

CG: Perhaps if we start by asking what effects that media attention had on Social Services, starting with the management of Social Services. What was the management's response to the media?

SSM: The response to the media was almost all internal, although we have a press office, and the details of the case were related to the press office. It was a very defensive response both to the media and within the Department. It was almost double checking what we were doing. At that time we had been through Juvenile Courts and Wardship Courts, and got Care Orders in regard to the previous three children, so we were very much aware of what we were doing and the legal backing for it. The

management were asking us to go back and check the case and ensure that we were doing the right thing. Local management was quite intimidated by the press and, as a result, trying to carry out what is a very difficult task, ie, removing a child after birth, became more difficult and intimidating knowing that the press was going to be there. It involved a lot more meticulous planning around the event itself, rather than around the way that we might help the parents come to terms with the removal of the child.

CG: Do you think that the media knew the details of the previous abuse to the older two children, when they ran these stories and took the line they did?

SSM: I don't think they knew the details or the extent of the abuse. I think they only knew that the older children had been removed on claims by the Social Services Department that they had been sexually abused. The parents' defence had been that the children must have seen videos. That's what they told the press.

CG: Do you think that Social Services should have done some sort of confidential briefing to the press about what had actually happened in the past? Would that have helped?

SSM: My personal view was that as the parents had put it in the public domain, we had a right to respond in kind, but I wouldn't have wanted to go into all the gory details that I've just described. But it would have been very helpful if the department had supplied details of the previous judgement made in the High Court, accepting that these children had been sexually abused on the basis of medical and social evidence, and which ratified the decision we had taken to remove the children.

CG: What effect did the media attention have on the individual workers who had to handle the case?

SSM: The local managers were intimidated by it. It was an added difficulty to what was an extremely difficult job in the first place. That was one aspect of it. The second aspect was that they were frustrated seeing their work, which had gone on over a number of years, turn against them, without them being able to defend themselves or even being able to put the true facts of

the case. They felt that they were having to read articles which they weren't able to respond to in any way, which made them feel that their credibility as social workers was challenged.

CG: Do you think that there is a case for off-the-record briefings to be given by the social workers who are actually involved in those circumstances?

SSM: I think there is a role for the Social Services Department to be involved in a proactive way with the press, to give off-the-record briefings. I'd rather it wasn't the social workers themselves, because they would feel that they were being questioned by the press and I would prefer that to be a task of senior management, who weren't personally involved in the case.

CG: In a nearby authority, in similar sorts of cases, relationships between the police and Social Services broke down very badly and received considerable publicity. How were the police involved in this case?

SSM: By the time it got to the attention of the press, the police were no longer involved. Police were involved over a period of approximately six months when the 3-year-old and 5-year-old were making their allegations against their parents, grandparents and various other adults.

CG: Who were they making those allegations to?

SSM: They initially made the allegations of sexual abuse to a school teacher and were then interviewed by police and Social Services. When they were in foster care they started saying things that brought out the more 'ritualistic' aspects of the abuse. They were speaking and drawing various pictures at the Child and Family Therapy Centre which suggested these 'satanic' aspects of the abuse. The police interviewed them at different times over a period of about six months and one particular female constable was involved throughout. She was absolutely brilliant and, to be fair to her, although we didn't get a criminal prosecution, it always seemed that she had the backing of her superior officers right from the planning stages up to Superintendent level. As the constable re-interviewed, the ritualistic aspects of the abuse became more apparent and the matter was referred to Chief Super-

intendent level, and so as far as the Social Services department was concerned, it was a totally different experience from the nearby authority.

CG: How were the two older children, who described their experiences, removed from home?

SSM: They were removed in a fairly straightforward way on a Place of Safety Order. They made the allegations at school, the mother was informed of these allegations and that the children would be interviewed. The interviews took place at the local police station and then the children were removed to foster care.

CG: Was there anything like a raid by the police on the home, because that was covered in some of the stories that I read?

SSM: Subsequent to their removal on a Place of Safety Order, about four weeks later as some of the aspects of 'satanic' abuse became apparent, and as some other individuals were named by the children, there was a planning meeting with Social Services senior management and the police at Superintendent level, where a 'dawn raid' was organised at various houses, including the one from which we had removed the two children, and also some houses in a nearby authority where some of the other adults lived.

CG: So no children were taken up in this 'dawn raid'?

SSM: Four children were removed by the other Social Services Department at the time and they returned to their parents later the same day.

CG: In the media coverage that describes Social Services as the 'baby snatchers' in this case, there was never any criticism that I saw of the police role in the proceedings. It seems to me that very often the police seem to get a better media coverage. Why do you think that is?

SSM: I think that is because the police are far better at dealing with the press. The Department and local authorities in general tend to be very defensive towards the press, whereas the police have a very active press department, who are able to put their points across first. I think, secondly, there is a higher regard for the police in this country than there is for a Social Services Department. Since the Maria Colwell affair there has been a number of inquiries into

social work practice in various cases. Those have either come down on Social Services Departments for not acting quickly enough or not acting effectively enough, or for 'going over the top' in cases such as Cleveland, Rochdale and the Orkneys. And so I think social work as a whole has become very defensive and local authorities' social work more defensive than most.

CG: Where does this case fit with the Orkneys case in terms of the time scale? Was this occurring after that case had come to media attention or before?

SSM: The original removal of the children was prior to the Orkneys case. I don't think if it had been after that case, there would have been any agreement on dawn raids, for example. The removal of the fourth child, I think, took place after Orkneys, but there is no question of police involvement or raids or anything. It was simply a Place of Safety Order and wardship.

CG: Is there anything else you want to say about the case itself?

SSM: I think it's worth noting the judgement in the Wardship case, because that heard a lot of evidence from different people, some who had been involved from the start, and

some who had subsequently become involved, and from an expert witness. The judge said:

I am satisfied that the children have been sexually abused in a most evil way. The probability is that they have been forced to participate in sexual orgies of a sadistic nature. They may be damaged irreparably. The mother has failed to provide protection, there is evidence that she was a willing participant.

So the judge was satisfied beyond any doubt that the children had been sexually abused. Another point he made was that the two oldest children are still exhibiting sexualised behaviour that you wouldn't expect of children who are now eight and six years old.

CG: So that behaviour was being exhibited 3 years after their removal from home?

SSM: Yes



This interview will be concluded in the next issue of *Children Australia*.

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