

## COMMENTARY

# THE SATANIC RITUAL ABUSE CONTROVERSY

FRANK W. PUTNAM

Laboratory of Developmental Psychology, National Institute of Mental Health, Bethesda, MD

THE ISSUES RAISED by the papers of Jonker and Jonker-Bakker and Young and colleagues are representative of a major controversy dividing the child abuse community, the alleged existence of a vast international, multigenerational, conspiracy practicing religious worship of satan through sex and death rituals involving torture, incest, perverted sex, animal and human sacrifice, cannibalism, and necrophilia. In addition to suffering rape, bizarre tortures and being forced to participate in victimizing others, alleged victims of satanic ritual abuse (SRA) are often reported to have been "brainwashed" with the aid of hypnosis and drugs and implanted with suggestions to kill themselves or commit other acts on command. These "triggers" allegedly can be activated by covert cues embedded in prosaic objects, e.g., flowers or greeting cards, in a manner strikingly reminiscent of scenes from the "The Manchurian Candidate," a famous movie about "brainwashing" during the Korean War.

Although a few articles alleging SRA activities have been published in clinical journals, most of the information now circulating in the therapist, child protective service, and police communities is derived from workshops, seminars, symposia, and lectures delivered at trainings and professional meetings. As Mulhern has documented in a systematic study of the teaching techniques used by lecturers on SRA, many of these training sessions use a set of proselytizing strategies employed by organizations seeking to convert individuals to a specific belief system (Mulhern, 1991). In the past three years, scores of professional workshops on the diagnosis and treatment of SRA have been held in the United States and Canada. Some of the same presenters have participated in similar trainings and clinical consultations in England and Holland.

Despite the widespread dissemination of information on alleged SRA activities and the increasingly frequent diagnosis of SRA in patients with dissociative disorders, there is a complete absence of independent evidence corroborating the existence of such cults or their alleged activities such as human sacrifice, cannibalism, and sex and death orgies. Despite hundreds of investigations in the United States by local police departments and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, there has never been a single documented case of satanic murder, human sacrifice, or cannibalism (Lanning, 1989b). Similarly, the police in Holland and England, despite intensive investigations, have failed to find any evidence substantiating allegations of SRA. This disturbing failure to establish any credible independent verification of the

existence of satanic ritual abusive activities has led many in the child abuse community to urge extreme caution in accepting allegations of SRA as established fact.

The papers considered here represent two major perspectives on the SRA problem, the allegations made by adults who report that they experienced SRA in childhood (Young et al.) and the allegations of children who report being recently involved in SRA (Jonker and Jonker-Bakker). It is commonly asserted in SRA trainings that the allegations of adult and children SRA victims are very similar, supporting claims that satanic cults are multigenerational. In actual fact, there are often major discrepancies between adult and child descriptions of SRA activities suggesting that these two sets of allegations may derive, in part, from separate sources and that they are not simply transgenerational equivalents. As Young et al. note, there is general agreement in the child abuse community that teenage use of satanic symbols and themes in heavy metal/punk rock music and culture is not directly related to the SRA allegations made by children or adults.

In evaluating reports of SRA it is important to note the underlying beliefs of the authors. The Jonker and Jonker-Bakker paper begins, "In May 1987, cases of child sexual abuse came to light in Oude Pekela . . . (p. 191)." Throughout this paper the authors express a firm and unwavering conviction that these acts did in fact happen and were accurately described by the children, although parents and the police expressed disbelief and ultimately the case was closed for lack of evidence. Young et al. (1991) seemingly adopt a more neutral position, although they indicate that their initial disbelief rapidly gave way to an increasing acceptance of the possibility of SRA, a shift paralleled by many of their patients who became ". . . increasingly certain that their reports of ritual abuse reflected actual memories" (p. 186). Most SRA workshops proceed from the strongly held conviction that SRA activities are real and constitute a major threat to our society.

Both papers state that their purpose is to convey to clinicians information on a set of symptoms and behaviors that constitute evidence for a specific SRA syndrome. Neither paper, however, contains a comparison group; consequently it is impossible to ascertain the specificity of these suggested sequelae. Based on Table 2, with the exception of the vaguely described "dissociative states with satanic overtones," the Young et al. (1991) sample would be symptomatically indistinguishable from any of the published series of MPD patients (e.g., Coons, Bowman, & Milstein, 1988; Putnam, Guroff, Silberman, Barban, & Post, 1986; Ross, Norton, & Wozney, 1989). Similarly, the list of behaviors noted by Jonker and Jonker-Bakker (sleep disturbances, enuresis, sexualized behaviors, swearing, aggression, isolation, and anxiety, p. 194) are indistinguishable from the effects of many types of stress and trauma in children and in no way constitute the specification of a unique SRA syndrome.

It is surprising how little actual data is contained in either paper. Although they refer to a survey of 90 children, the Jonker and Jonker-Bakker paper is entirely descriptive relying on quotations for documentation, several of which are clearly not first hand from the children, e.g., "Some children spoke of a rope being tightened around their neck until their 'eyes rolled around in *their heads*' " (italics added, p. 192). Repeatedly the Jonker and Jonker-Bakker paper implies that many or all of the children reported a similar experience, but never once actually gives the percentage of children responding positively or negatively. In the case of the adults, Young et al. were in an excellent position to gather a great deal of additional information, as well as detailed medical workups and photographic documentation of the physical findings that they cite as corroborative evidence. In the future, reviewers must require higher standards of data collection, documentation, and analysis to support claims of SRA syndromic specificity.

The only source of information on alleged SRA experiences for both papers are the memories of the alleged victims. Young et al. discuss a few of the many problems that patients with dissociative disorders have in remembering traumatic events. In addition to profound effects

of trauma on recall, many of the memories of alleged satanic ritual abuse were uncovered with the use of hypnosis. Both laboratory and forensic investigations have shown a number of serious problems with the accuracy and validity of memories recovered through hypnotic techniques (Perry, Laurence, D'Eon, Tallant, 1988).

The principle argument that both papers use to advance the validity of their allegations is that these reports were made independently and yet are highly similar in detail. Nowhere, however, is there a systematic analysis of the actual degree of similarity of these allegations. Young et al. stress the geographic separation of their patients and claim that when their patients were in contact with each other, e.g., as patients on a unit specializing in the treatment of dissociative disorders, they were reluctant to reveal details to each other. Jonker and Jonker-Bakker state "There was no possibility of all the children knowing each other . . . (p. 191)." These assertions represent a naive and simplistic model of contagion, based on the idea that individuals must be in direct contact with each other to share common information. Studies of the sociometric patterns of rumor contagion have demonstrated that rumors, urban-legends, and other folk tales can be rapidly disseminated throughout our society and are shared in common by large numbers of people who have never directly met each other. The child abuse community is particularly susceptible to such a rumor process as there are multiple, interconnected communication/education networks shared by therapists and patients alike. In addition, there is massive media dissemination of material on the satanic through dramatic autobiographical accounts, sensational talk-shows, and news reports of alleged cases, not to mention the numerous movies and television programs that feature occult and demonic themes. Contagion and contamination are very real and powerful processes that can account for a large degree of apparent similarity in SRA allegations.

Using a strategy commonly observed in SRA seminars and lectures, Young et al. seek to link the allegations of their patients with accounts of satanic practices described in historical sources. In particular, they cite Hill and Goodwin (1989) as listing 11 elements of satanic ritual derived from pre-Inquisitional accounts. The article by Hill and Goodwin has been previously criticized as a highly selective reading of historical sources (Noll, 1989). Distinguished medieval scholars, including Cohn (1975) and Russell (1972) do not find any evidence that satanic cults, witches' covens, or black masses ever existed in those times. Rather it appears that these elements, which permeate many SRA workshop descriptions of satanism, first appeared as part of 18th and 19th century occult revivals, popular among the upper class in Europe and the United States (Cohn, 1975). However, allegations of ritual murder of infants, blood drinking, cannibalism, and other abominations have frequently been made by majority groups against minorities and were invoked by Hitler against the Jews and Gypsies. Indeed, in a few SRA seminars, one can detect an underlying antisemitic theme that is reminiscent of the Blood Libel.

The picture of the alleged satanic cults that emerges from the two papers is not readily believable. On the one hand, they are said to be highly organized, multigenerational, international groups with membership turnover (e.g., the Young et al. subject whose family left the cult when she turned 11 (p. 186) that practice highly codified religious rituals. On the other hand they are depicted as evil incarnate participating in violent cannibal rape orgies, which incredibly leave absolutely no trace of the blood and gore spilled. Equally incredibly, in the case of the Jonker and Jonker-Bakker paper, they were able to repeatedly lure large numbers of children away from their normal play or school activities, drug them, and force them to participate in painful and disgusting rituals without anyone ever noticing that the children were missing or without the children protesting to their parents or teachers. Such total child crowd control is incomprehensible to anyone who has ever tried to herd a group of children through a museum or zoo.

One must ask how can such large scale, violent, and bloody activities escape detection in

every single instance where they have been alleged to have occurred? Authorities on criminal conspiracies note that the larger a conspiracy is and the longer that it is in operation, the more difficult it is to keep it a secret, particularly if members can leave the organization. Studies of real cults, e.g., Hare Krishna, Children of God, People's Temple, have shown that when such groups engage in violent or criminal behavior they often implode and disintegrate in rapid order. How do the satanists avoid this fate?

The most frightening image emerging from these two papers is not the alleged satanic conspiracy, but the actual massive social disorder that occurred in Oude Pekela, Holland. Jonker and Jonker-Bakker describe a community turned against itself, filled with fear, anger, and distrust. Ultimately, the national government had to intervene to restore some measure of confidence in the local authorities. Similar breakdowns in public trust of the police and social service agencies have occurred in connection with allegations of SRA activities in the United States and England. This is the most destructive legacy of such a witch hunt. The Jonker and Jonker-Bakker paper is particularly inflammatory in this regard, repeatedly stating or implying, without specifying any actual evidence, that the police were, at best, incompetent, unqualified, and neglectful. In the future, unsubstantiated charges of police or government incompetence or neglect in the handling of SRA investigations should not be published in professional journals as they only serve to erode public and professional trust in the law enforcement community. A loss of confidence in the police or a fracture in the crucial working alliance between the police and child protective services would be catastrophic for the safety and well-being of children at risk for abuse and neglect.

What then are we to make of the allegations contained in the two papers and the larger SRA controversy dividing the child abuse community? Like the now discredited "Missing Children Movement" of the early 1980s, which once alleged that tens to hundreds of thousands of children were being kidnapped and murdered each year, there may be a very small kernel of truth here, e.g., the U.S. Department of Justice now estimates that there are 52–158 children kidnapped and murdered by strangers each year, the majority being between 14–17 years of age (Lanning, 1989a). There is no evidence, however, to support claims that hundreds to tens of thousands of babies and children are being sacrificed or abused in satanic rituals.

The explanation for these claims probably lies in a complex set of dynamics operating in the larger child abuse community. Ganaway has discussed some of the psychological issues that appear involved in the confabulation of satanic allegations by adults (Ganaway, 1989). The material generated by the children is particularly susceptible to being influenced and/or misinterpreted by interviewers primed by SRA workshops to read evidence of satanic abuse into every nonspecific symptom of stress and trauma. The labyrinthine communication/rumor networks of the child abuse community, crisscrossing an array of disparate professions and disciplines, rapidly and uncritically transmits SRA allegations generating a false impression of menace and extracting a common denominator profile that is mistaken for evidence of similarity.

There is obviously more at work here than these elements, but this process can be studied and understood and a better approximation of the truth distilled. It is important to acknowledge that there is, in fact, a serious controversy within the child abuse community about the existence of SRA. It is important that we in the field seek to resolve this issue in an objective and scientific manner. Critiques and claims should focus on the nature, quality, and interpretation of the data rather than on the personalities involved. We must not permit disagreements on this subject to disrupt working relationships, to pit discipline against discipline, or to destroy the hard won credibility of child abuse victims, adult or child. There is a great deal at stake here.

## REFERENCES

- Cohn, N. (1975). *Europe's inner demons: An enquiry inspired by the great witch hunt*. New York: Basic Books.
- Coons, P. M., Bowman, E. S., Milstein V. (1988). Multiple personality disorder: A clinical investigation of 50 cases. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, **176**, 519–527.
- Ganaway, G. (1989). Historical truth versus narrative truth: Clarifying the role of exogenous trauma in the etiology of multiple personality disorder and its variants. *Dissociation*, **2**, 205–220.
- Hill, S., & Goodwin, J. (1989). Satanism: Similarities between patient accounts and preinquisition historical sources. *Dissociation*, **2**, 39–44.
- Lanning, K. V. (1989a). *Child sex rings: A behavioral analysis for criminal justice professionals handling cases of child sexual exploitation*. Washington, DC: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.
- Lanning, K. V. (1989b, October). Satanic, occult, ritualistic crime: A law-enforcement perspective. *Police Chief*, pp. 1–11.
- Mulhern, S. A. (1991). Satanism and psychotherapy: A rumor in search of an inquisition. In J. T. Richardson, J. Best, & D. Bromley (Eds.), *The satanism scare*. Paris: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Noll, R. (1989). Satanism, UFO abductions, historians and clinicians: Those who do not remember the past. . . , *Dissociation*, **2**, 251–253.
- Perry, C. W., Laurence, J. R., D'Eon, J., Tallant, B. (1988). Hypnotic age regression techniques in the elicitation of memories: Applied uses and abuses. In H. Pettinati (Ed.), *Hypnosis and memory*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Putnam, F. W., Guroff, J. J., Silberman, E. K., Barban, L., Post, R. M. (1986). The clinical phenomenology of multiple personality disorder: Review of 100 cases. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, **47**, 285–293.
- Ross, C. A., Norton, G. R., Wozney, K. (1989). Multiple personality disorder: An analysis of 236 cases. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, **34**, 413–418.
- Russell, J. B. (1972). *Witchcraft in the middle ages*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.