



## Satanic Ritual Abuse: How Real?

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*ABSTRACT: Claims of ritual satanic abuse are examined from the perspective of law enforcement. The Law enforcement profession has neither validated SRA as a widespread condition nor found evidence to support the claims of a national satanic conspiracy. The acceptance of such accusations is supported only by the mental health professionals who believe them without corroborating evidence. This belief in the face of the absence of evidence reverses the burden of proof and has serious implications for the mental health professions and the people they attempt to help.*

### Conspiracy Claims

I am not a mental health professional. I don't even play one on television. Rather, I'm a police officer with concerns about the current issue of satanic ritual abuse (SRA). Some members of the mental health profession, as well as my own, have constructed a model of criminal conduct based on the stories of patients in therapy; stories allegedly supported by anecdotal incidents which either involve, or appear to involve, satanic beliefs.

Survivor stories form the bedrock and the basis of current concerns, fears, and claims about SRA. Without survivors, such incidents as church desecrations and cemetery vandalism might be seen for the relatively minor incidents they are instead of an affirmation of an alleged murderous mega-cult.

This mega-cult is allegedly multi-generational in nature involving family members in child abuse, human sacrifice, kidnapping, sexual violence, narcotics abuse and distribution, and child pornography. Alleged participants include public officials, police, judges, lawyers, and physicians (Hicks, 1991). This model is often used by police officers in public as well as professional presentations and is relied upon by some in the mental health community as factually established.

However, the fact is that such an organized conspiracy is grounded only in survivor stories and has no more validity than the stories themselves. And a story, no matter how often or convincingly told, has no more validity than the evidence that supports it. Furthermore, a story or allegation without support carries no more weight, in an evidentiary sense, than a denial made in refutation of the claim.

The burden of proof always rests with the claims-maker. The degree of certainty necessary to meet that burden may vary. However, to a profession such as law enforcement, whose standards of evidence include proof beyond reasonable doubt, probable cause, and reasonable suspicion, survivors' claims are neither beyond reasonable doubt nor are they particularly probable.

I posit that the lack of evidence in support of survivor claims has far-reaching implications for the mental health profession currently, its future efficacy, and to the persons it seeks to help. I believe that those who act under the assumption that SRA allegations made in therapy represent a stand-alone objective body of evidence operate under the false premise that the objective reality of widespread satanic ritual abuse has been established and that survivor stories are sufficient in themselves to establish that reality.

Let me give you an example from my own experience. In the summer of 1991, I spoke with a young woman who was in therapy in a Wisconsin institution specializing in SRA treatment. She told me she had memories of her father, a satanist, and others she could not name, sacrificing a child. She knew the general area of the city where she claimed it occurred. She felt it happened in 1975 or 1976, and the child was unknown to her. She recalled that the child's body was buried at the place of sacrifice.

I told her we had no report to verify a child still missing from that time. Neither did we have any evidence of a cult existing in the city, either then or now. The area where the child was allegedly buried has been developed, and there were no reports of human bones being found.

She said she doubted that her memory was real, but her therapist encouraged her to believe because, "we know these cults exist for a fact, and we know how they operate."

I told her that this particular instance wasn't a fact, and that I would gladly speak to her therapist. I never heard from the therapist or the woman again.

If this young woman came to believe, as a fact, that her father is a murderer, in the face of her own doubts, because her therapist believes the existence of such cults is an established fact, then one may see my point.

The degree of certainty espoused by some in the mental health profession that SRA and the cults that practice it actually exist amazes me. For example, D. Corydon Hammond (1992), a Utah based psychologist and an ardent supporter of a satanic criminal conspiracy; maintains that "people who say it isn't real are either naive, like the people who didn't want to believe the holocaust, or they're dirty."

I assume that if one is "dirty" then one is a member of this cult.

Statements such as Hammond's certainly limit the debate. But Hammond is not alone. Dan Sexton (1989) Director of the National Child Abuse Hotline, stated at the 1989 National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect:

I'm not a law enforcement person, thank God! I'm a psychology person, so I don't need the evidence. I come from a very different place. I don't need to see evidence to believe ... I don't care what law enforcement's perspective is, that's not my perspective. I'm a mental health professional. I need to find a way to help survivors heal the trauma that they had as children and to help other clinicians who are trying to help survivors and victims of this kind of crime.

It is somewhat difficult to speak of crime and victims of crime while at the same time dismissing the law enforcement perspectives. After all, the detection, solution, and prevention of crime, as well as crime victim assistance, are major law enforcement concerns. But Sexton (1989) limits the debate further still:

I don't want more survivors going into clinicians' offices feeling again that they are being reabused by the mental health profession. If you do not believe that this could possibly happen, do not work with this issue, we don't want you a part of this because it is simply going to make the issue be more confounded and more difficult.

Now, even the perspectives of those in Sexton's own profession, if they differ from his own, are dismissed. Sexton doesn't need evidence to believe. So why should they? To ask for or seek out some form of corroboration is to reabuse a patient who may or may not have been abused in the first place. That the abuse did or did not occur may be objectively verifiable with a little inquiry. But that inquiry might imply doubt, doubt might reabuse the patient, and we have a vicious cycle. Besides, those who doubt run a real risk of being labeled "dirty."

### **What Passes for Evidence**

What passes for evidence is as wide open as the debate is limited. For example, Roland Summit (1987) maintains:

Because we see it clinically, we see something we believe is real, clinically; and whether or not our colleagues, or the press, or scientists at large, or politicians, or local law enforcement agencies agree that this is real, most of us have some sort of personal sense that it is; at least speaking as a bias of one and for the members of the platform.

What I am hearing is the proposition that the concerns and doubts of a great many must yield to "some sort of personal sense" that SRA and satanic cults are real. How does one quantify a "personal sense?" Precisely how is one sort of "personal" sense more valid than another?

A clinical mode of criminal activity has been constructed describing "the behaviors and practices of a network of cults that no one but the alleged victim has ever seen" (Mulhern, 1991, p.146). People who do not care about the perspectives of others, who do not need to see evidence to believe, or who have some personal sense of cult reality, have undertaken to maintain the viability of the model on their say-so alone. I submit that this is insufficient evidence.

If survivor claims were objectively real, there would be objective evidence to support them. If the satanic conspiracy were objectively real, so too would the evidence to support it. One cannot prove a negative and one doesn't need to. The claims-makers carry the burden of proof and they carry it on a case-by-case basis. If Jane Doe alleges that her baby was sacrificed, then Jane's case is investigated on its own merits. That Suzy Q claims her baby was sacrificed neither confirms Jane's story nor relieves the need to investigate Suzy's case on its merits. Claims of abuse, unverified, cannot vicariously validate still other unverified claims.

There are crimes committed, up to and including murder, with satanic overtones. Some of the perpetrators have maintained that they acted in fealty to satan. Among these are Scott Waterhouse, Sean Sellers, Ricky Saso, and Richard Ramirez. These cases, notorious as they may be, are anecdotal in nature and are separated from each other by time and distance. There is no evidence that these persons conspired with, or even know, each other. Each acted upon his own motivations. There is no reason to doubt that almost certainly other individuals will act upon similar motivations. This, however, does nothing to advance the conspiracy theory.

It is the claims as to the actions of the alleged conspirators and the scale of the alleged conspiracy that render survivor stories most suspect. David O'Reilly (1993), writing for *Knight-Ridder Newspapers*, gives the following examples:

- Larry Jones, a police lieutenant in Boise, Idaho, and founder of the Cult Crime Impact Network says satanists slaughter 50,000 children each year.
- John Frattanela, author of an article, "America's Best Kept Secret," in *Passport* magazine, says the number is 5,000.
- Michael Warnke, a controversial Christian evangelist who says he was a satanic "high priest" in college, puts the number at two "million" "kidnapped and murdered" children each year in the United States.

These figures are unverified and impossible to defend. According to the FBI's Statistical Analysis Section (personal communication, June 24, 1993) there were 9,960 homicides reported to the FBI in 1965. By 1975, the number had risen to 20,510, and had fallen in 1985 to 18,980. At present, the annual average is approximately 25,000 reported homicides. Presumably, some, but quite obviously not all, of these alleged sacrifices are included in these reported homicides. If they are, their existence must be established on a case-by-case basis. The claims-makers must demonstrate which homicides constitute sacrifices, and why.

Most of these sacrifices, however, would have to be over and above the annual reported figures. That means that if Frattanela's figures are correct, the annual homicide rate is 20% higher than reported. Should Jones be correct, a human sacrifice would occur somewhere in the United States, on average, six times every hour. Worse still, if Warnke should be correct, more Americans are killed by satanists in a year than were killed in World War II, Korea, and Viet Nam combined. And this goes on under our noses, behind our backs, over our heads, under our feet, and everywhere else but before our eyes.

## **Conspiratorial Aspects**

The housekeeping required to hide that kind of carnage cannot be verified, but it is often described. According to survivors, bodies are burned in crematoriums operated by mortician members of the cult, or involve a portable crematorium. The fact is that I have found no record of any mortician being indicted for disposing of a body or explaining how morticians routinely dispose of cult victims. Moreover, law enforcement has never seized a portable crematorium in any cult case.



There are, of course, unidentified bodies located every year. In 1992, there were 1,331, of which 1,183 were later identified (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1993). Additionally, not every reported homicide is solved. Larry Jones believes very much in the cult's existence. He states:

Any detective knows there are unsolved murders in every jurisdiction around the country. People disappear and never come home, or they disappear and ten years later we find a decomposed body (Bennets, 1993, p. 62).

There's a peculiar logic at work here. We are told by survivors that cults kill "runaways and transients" (Berg, 1988). However, it does not follow, ipso facto, that every unsolved homicide or unidentified body is cult related. Each case must be examined in light of the evidence, particularly so because other possible motives (robbery, rape, etc.) must be eliminated. Additionally, 1,331 bodies are nowhere near 50,000.

Jacque Baladois, a self professed cult survivor, maintains that her cult "did a lot of child sacrifice" and they either kidnapped or bred the intended victim (Berg, 1988). Child abduction attributed to the cult heightens parental fears and adds a particularly vicious edge to the cult. Yet honest numbers don't support the slaughter. There are between 3,200 and 4,600 classic child abductions annually (U.S. Department of Justice, 1990). A classic abduction involves a non-family member who either: (1) takes the child overnight; (2) kills the child; (3) transports the child 50 miles or more; (4) ransoms the child; or (5) shows evidence of keeping the child. The number of children kidnapped and killed by strangers is between 52 and 158 a year (U.S. Department of Justice, 1989). Of the 3,200 to 4,600 children abducted, 95% percent are released. Some have been sexually assaulted, and others not, prior to their release. The children killed are numbered among the 5% not released (Kenneth Lanning, personal communication). This means that between 160 and 180 children simply vanish every year as a result of stranger abduction.

I am not attempting to trivialize the death and abductions of children. My point is that the numbers don't support claims. Again, each case must be examined on its own merits. One cannot use the validated fact that some children are abducted and killed to support unconfirmed assertions that satanists are responsible.

David Bromley (1991), a professor of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University, observes that "despite the alleged existence of an elaborate organizational network, no organizational apparatus-correspondence, membership lists, phone logs, travel records, bank accounts, buildings or meeting places, ritual implements, crematoriums, pornographic filming equipment or films produced, have ever been discovered" (p. 62).

After nearly ten years of active investigation, American law enforcement has found no evidence to support survivor claims. There is simply no proof of the existence of such a satanic criminal conspiracy. And this is significant in view of the fact that law enforcement has a thorough understanding of how conspiracies function and a record of success in investigating them. The FBI that maintains that there is no evidence of a satanic criminal conspiracy is the same FBI that penetrated a

conspiracy to bomb the United Nations building.

Conspiracies are not monolithic in nature. There is no precedent for a satanic conspiracy whose members act in perfect harmony and commit murder, sexual abuse, kidnapping, and other such acts of violence without experiencing defection on ideological grounds. Conspiracies are rather fragile in nature and are often unhinged by applying the acronym MICE — Money, Ideology, Compromise, and Ego (Barren, 1983, p. 99). One or all of these elements can, and often do, lead members of a conspiracy to defect. I served on a strike force directed at several conspiracies whose members engaged in arson, mail fraud, interstate transportation of stolen property, public corruption, and other such offenses. We employed MICE with great success.

When claims of cult activity are investigated, they fail either in the face of no supporting evidence or other explanations. Cynthia Kissner (1992/1993), executive director of the Cult Awareness Network, recently cited an alleged plot by satanic cults in Iowa and Texas to kidnap a Catholic nun. She claims that only intervention by law enforcement prevented "what clearly could have developed into criminal activity" (p.55). I investigated this case and offer it as an example of a sensational claim found to be without foundation.

In October of 1989, I received a telephone call from a young woman who claimed to have important information. She said that she was associated with a satanic cult. A friend of hers was an actual member, but she would sometimes participate in rituals whenever they were one short of the required thirteen persons. She described the rituals as involving animal sacrifice, the consuming of the animal's blood, the use of hallucinogenic drugs, and sex.

While she was at her friend's house, she overheard a conversation, allegedly between cult members, to kidnap, rape, and kill a nun. This was to take place on Halloween night at the Carmelite convent in Sioux City. These cult members had a diagram of the grounds showing the locations of the outer wall, gates, garden area, a storage shed, and their relationships to the convent building. They also had a diagram of the convent which depicted sliding doors on the outside of the intended victim's room. There was an "X" to mark that room and the name "Alice" (pseudonym). The girl told me she had contacted an organization in Chicago specializing in this area with her information. I assume that it was CAN as the Iowa Department of Criminal Investigation was contacted by CAN with this same information.

The girl identified herself as Kalista and promised to keep in touch with me with any other information. Because she was so concerned about the safety of the nun, I promised I would remove her. This became significant since I never had to keep the promise and I never made the statement to anyone but this Kalista.

At first, the information seemed extremely accurate. The diagram was correct in every detail. Although there was no "Sister Alice" occupying the targeted room, the occupant had only recently taken her vows. Her given name was Alice. But this was as close to reality as this report would ever get.

The sisters had been corresponding with a girl by the name of Kalista from

Houston, Texas. This person had claimed to be a former cult member who witnessed infant sacrifices. She claimed to have been raped five times during a ritual, which her mother presided over, to initiate her into the cult. In other letters, she claimed to have been an incest victim and she described how her little brother died of leukemia. The nuns felt sorry for her, of course, and they were happy to hear that she wished to put her past behind her and become one of them.

So they sent her what could be described as recruiting material which included a scale diagram of the premises. This was meant to demonstrate how they lived. The person who sent the material was Alice, who marked the location of her room on the diagram and signed the letter. The mystery of the diagram was solved.

I decided not to remove Alice from the premises when I observed that they already had "police" protection. Two German Shepherds that had been retired from the K-9 Unit had been given to the nuns. Although they were no longer "working" dogs, they would defend both the nuns and the property. I also had doubts about Kalista.

Those doubts were confirmed when three days later, Kalista walked into a Houston convent with wounds on both forearms that resembled knife cuts. She told those nuns her story and claimed the cult tortured her when they found out that Alice had been moved. Since Alice had never moved, only Kalista would have had a reason to believe she was.

I used the address that the nuns had used in corresponding with the girl when I contacted the Houston police. They located the young woman who was a college student. She was an only child. There never were other children to die of leukemia. She was also a patient in therapy. There was no cult conspiracy beyond that which existed in this young woman's mind.

This was a report of cult conspiracy and not an actual case. Law enforcement did not intervene in this matter as intervention was never needed. We investigated and determined the matter to be unfounded. This is not atypical of what law enforcement agencies find when investigating such claims. Nor is it atypical of an unsupported claim being published as a verified fact to further misinform the public.

From his position within the FBI, Ken Lanning, a supervisory agent in the [Behavioral Science Section](#), has access to the reports and investigations of American law enforcement in general. This access provides him with a unique vantage point from which to survey SRA allegations from a law enforcement perspective. There is weight to his words when he observes:

For at least eight years American law enforcement has been aggressively investigating the allegations of victims of ritual abuse. There is little or no evidence for that portion of their allegations that deals with large-scale baby breeding, human sacrifice, and organized Satanic conspiracies (Lanning, 1992, p.40).

Law enforcement has investigated SRA and survivor claims and has rendered its judgment. There is no objective evidence to support such claims.

This judgment must necessarily hold ramifications for the mental health profession.

Survivor claims and the cults they describe are mutually supportive. If either fails, then both fail. If it has been determined that that which "survivors" describe is not objectively real, then it follows that survivor stories are not objectively real. One cannot assume that a story told by a patient in therapy simply represents another case of an authenticated fact. Conversely, one cannot assume that it is not objectively true, either whole or in part. Each claim must be examined on its own merits, and in light of the evidence which either supports or discredits the claim.

I recently had the opportunity to interview parents of women in therapy who "recovered" memories of abuse. As an example of the situations they face, I will use Bob and Jean Smith (pseudonyms). The Smith's daughter had graduated from law school and was employed in a major firm. Problems developed which she attributed to stress in the work environment. She sought the services of a therapist who was neither a psychiatrist nor a Ph.D. psychologist. As a result of the use of hypnosis, she recalled being sexually abused from the age of nine months to fourteen years. Her memories also included satanic rituals and the sacrificial murder of a five-year-old child.

She wrote her parents a letter accusing them of these acts. Upon receipt of the letter, her parents traveled a considerable distance to speak to her. When confronted by her parents and their denials of her allegations, she expressed some doubt as to the validity of her memories. But the therapist, when confronted by the parents, expressed no such doubts. She advised the Smiths, in no uncertain terms, that they had abused their daughter and had committed murder as part of some satanic ritual.

The therapist had no evidence to support her patient's claim. There was neither a body nor an independent witness to confirm the allegations. Yet the therapist strongly advised her patient to sever all ties with her parents. Furthermore, if the siblings would not support her, and they did not, she was advised to sever ties with them. In order to promote her "healing," this young woman, acting on her therapist's advice, has isolated herself from her immediate family. She has come to believe, or has been led to believe, that her parents are murderous child abusers.

The Smiths cannot prove their innocence either. Their daughter's therapist dismissed their protests of innocence as an expression of "deep denial" and contended that they had suppressed their memories of the events. Of course, she recommended that they enter therapy with her. That recommendation was rejected.

An entire family has been estranged because the disturbing story of a disturbed woman in therapy was taken as authenticated fact. My argument throughout this paper has been that no allegation is factual until proven to be so. The continued uncritical acceptance of "survivor" stories as objectively real has created a new population of genuine survivors. These are the families who must survive the loss of a child through estrangement. They must survive the potential, if not the realization, of prosecution and imprisonment for crimes they did not commit. They must survive therapists who fail to see the ramifications of their recommendations to patients.

When I was a less experienced officer, I decried the hoops and hurdles of the



criminal justice system. Now I recognize that those barriers represent Constitutional protections. The burden of proof must rest with the accuser. The accused need not prove innocence. The acceptance of accusations supported only by the mental health professionals who believe them because of some "personal sense" of their validity as evidence in a court of law has reversed the burden of proof and destroyed the presumption of innocence.

The law enforcement profession has neither validated SRA as a widespread condition nor found evidence to support the claims of a national satanic conspiracy. In the main, law enforcement has moved to the periphery of this issue and gone on to other things. Therapists now occupy the role of validators. The uncritical acceptance of a patient's claims of abuse may suit clinical purposes. But once those claims leave that environment, a more stringent set of evidentiary standards is required. One does not become a "survivor" simply by claiming abuse any more than one becomes a "perpetrator" simply by being accused.

Sherrill Mulhern (1992), an anthropologist specializing in the study of the socialization and socio/cultural representation of dissociative states, "dreads" the moment when self-righteous vested interest groups, which today stand side by side with champions of the mental health perspective, place one hand on the Bible and point THEM out. I contend that that dreaded day has dawned.

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