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The psychology of occultism & ritual abuse

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The psychology of occultism & ritual abuse

Abstract

For years psychological literature has included cases and treatment implications for individuals affected by emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Most recently, ritual abuse, a rather new topic in the mental health arena, has emerged, but unfortunately seems to be a problem that has been in existence a very long time. Some have said ritual abuse started with satanic worship dated as far back as 610 A.D. in Southeastern Europe (Daniels, 1989). Others disagreed, saying this form of worship did not appear until the Christian church was established (Kahaner, 1988), and that in the 19th century a new spiritualistic movement began including mysticism and ancient witchcraft which ultimately became modern day Satanism. Not surprisingly, many have denied the existence of Satanic worship and ritual abuse entirely.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OCCULTISM & RITUAL ABUSE

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For years psychological literature has included cases and treatment implications for individuals affected by emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Most recently, ritual abuse, a rather new topic in the mental health arena, has emerged, but unfortunately seems to be a problem that has been in existence a very long time. Some have said ritual abuse started with satanic worship dated as far back as 610 A.D. in Southeastern Europe (Daniels, 1989). Others disagreed, saying this form of worship did not appear until the Christian church was established (Kahaner, 1988), and that in the 19th century a new spiritualistic movement began including mysticism and ancient witchcraft which ultimately became modern day Satanism. Not surprisingly, many have denied the existence of Satanic worship and ritual abuse entirely.

Unfortunately, society has been in denial before, and many suffered silently for decades and decades because people refused to believe gruesome acts (like sexual abuse, for example) could be possible. Perhaps in the 90's an awakening has occurred in the mental health field forcing professionals to recognize the deep suffering of abuse survivors and to develop appropriate treatment interventions and possibly preventative

measures as well. The literature claimed hundreds and thousands, possibly even millions of children each year experience extreme abuse for the purposes of Satanic worship, which result in serious emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual implications.

Knowing public awareness and acknowledgement quite possibly could be the only way to stop this viciously abusive cycle, some researchers have investigated and studied cult activity, Satanic worship, and the ritual abuse accompanying these. My purposes here include reporting various definitions of ritual abuse, explaining signs, symptoms, and forms of abuse involved, and discussing treatment issues to educate mental health professionals and provoke further study in this area.

Definition

Nurcombe and Unutzer (1991) have defined ritual abuse as "the sexual molestation of children, usually by multiple perpetrators, in conjunction with rituals that ceremonially invoke magical or supernatural powers" (p. 273). Agreeing with Nurcombe and Unutzer, Cozolino (1989) added that symbols and activities used repeatedly with children have a religious base behind them, which is accompanied with fright and intimidation. Because of the wide array of abusive activities involved, ritual

abuse has been difficult to define. As Whitfield (1987) pointed out, some people may consider bringing a child up an atheist or in a cult abusive, while others may not. Therefore, no absolute definition has ever existed. Adding to the frustrating task of defining ritual abuse, Lyons (1988) stated that because so little physical evidence is ever found, the burden lies exclusively on the children and their stories.

However, the literature consistently described similar patterns and themes among ritual abuse cases. For example, no matter how it has been demonstrated, the abuse generally involved a child, many adults (often dressed in black robes or other unusual costumes), the use of objects (like candles, sticks, inverted crosses, etc.), chanting, and some element of sacrifice or mutilation either with animals, human beings or both (Kahanter, 1988), all with the purposes of glorifying Satan and calling on his powers.

Additionally, a total obedience to an authority figure existed in most cases. So, despite the fact that ritual abuse was difficult to define universally, the likenesses and consistencies among instances made it more recognizable. However, Hicks (1991) pointed out there is no set standard for Satanic crime in terms of

racess, professions, and classes, because all seem to be represented in this abuse. Having labelled these activities "abuse," may have implied that all ritual abuse occurred involuntarily onto its victims.

Participation

Involuntary

Since Satanists believed using and abusing children was a victory over God, they purposely sought out young persons for their practices and ceremonials (Chromey, 1989). Large numbers of children were kidnapped each year, often around Easter season, the most popular time for Satanic sacrifices. These children were known as the "Winnebago kids" since many were snatched and thrown into Winnebagos to be taken away. Chromey added law enforcement officials remain particularly alert throughout this season year after year as kidnapping rates skyrocket.

According to Hicks (1991), another consistent setting for involuntary ritual abuse of children has been day care centers. Reports of child pornography practices, forced ingestion of blood, urine, feces, and animal body parts and mutilation activities have soared in the last decade. In 1983, 400 children were interviewed when suspicion of such Satanic activity

existed in McMartin Pre-school/day care center in Manhattan Beach, California. Of the 400, nearly 350 of those claimed to have been forced into sexual activities with adults and other rituals (Hicks, 1991). Satanists recognized running day care centers as a perfect arena for their worship because of their total authority and order over a large number of children.

Unfortunately, children have been victims by more than just strangers who kidnapped them and/or took advantage of direct contact with them. Mones (1991) found more often than not, ritual abuse occurred within the family system, sometimes over generations. Take the story of Michelle Smith for example. Hicks (1991) wrote about the incidences when she experienced ritual abuse amongst her family. She confided in her psychiatrist about how a baby was cut in half and rubbed all over her before she was thrown into a cage with snakes. She remembered her mother especially taking part in this ceremony in which she was forced to participate.

Many parents (along with their parents) have gotten involved with this form of worship and willingly sacrificed their children for the purposes of Satan. Children raised in this environment often end up raising their children in it as well, if they survived it

themselves. As stated previously however, not all children participated involuntarily.

Voluntary

Unbelievably, adolescents and young adults (often college-age students) have joined cults or have begun some level of Satanic worship voluntarily for reasons that seemed logical at the time. Young people have been very drawn to a new way of thinking and philosophy of life which involved worshipping a less traditional power and sacrificing one's total self for Satanic purposes. Cultists have sought and found young people during vulnerable periods of identity formation and loneliness.

In addition to this, Whitfield (1987) discovered teens especially have rejected their families and the religious values of their parents while searching for their own meaning to life. Seen as the ultimate form of rebellion, (Dumont & Altesman, 1989) kids have gotten involved with Satanic worship. Cultists and Satanic worshippers have known this and used this to brainwash them, making them think there was a more appealing way to live. The structure, warmth, and total acceptance within the cult provided what was needed to initiate new members (Deikman, 1990). Thus, the adolescents and young adults have voluntarily committed themselves to an

alternative lifestyle which they perceive at the time to be very satisfactory and meaningful.

Unfortunately, an underlying cycle of abuse occurred and was encouraged within the cults which on the surface seemed to carry the purposes of holy worship. Various types of mental and physical abuse have been performed to keep members from recognizing what truly has happened. Remesch-Allnutt (1985) added how eventually the previous reality-base of the adolescents and young adults has disappeared and been replaced with a new, but very destructive philosophy of living. Apparently, only a complete separation from these groups can bring a full awareness of the true characteristics and purposes behind cult life to those who have survived it.

Cults

Purposes

A cult has been defined in a variety of forms, but Ellwood and Partin (1988) say it is "any set of people bound together by devotion to a particular sacred person, object, or ideology" (p. 19). Yet, this definition has not offered reasons for cults to have existed for years. Very simply put, the purposes of a cult has most frequently been disguised as a means to

get all people to turn to God (or some other higher power) and prepare for the end of the earth. Kahaner (1988) supported this notion stating the rituals of a cult revolve around a source of supernatural power which is used to create changes needed.

However, the actions and behaviors of cult members have provided the cult leader with a gratifying life of glory without hardship or discomfort (Griffis, 1985). So in actuality, cult members are recruited for the financial gain and overwhelming comfort and success of the group leader, and little else.

Characteristics

Every cult had a leader who was to be obeyed unquestionably. The cult leader was usually looked upon paternally and often called "father" or "daddy" by members (Furniss, 1991). This aspect also played into the goal to provide new members with a sense of family belonging to keep them involved. Deikman (1990) further examined the familial quality within a cult noticing how members were placed into a forced dependency and child-like views of the leader who was looked upon as very wise.

Cults have expected total sacrifice from its members. All material possessions and financial

resources were given for the purposes of the cult. Meanwhile, members spent their days and nights with little food, rest, medical care, or free time, instead dedicating their time to intense study and prayer, meditation, and hard labor. Recruitment of new members also was a large portion of member duties to the cult. Galanter (1989a) provided an outstanding comparison to cult life saying, "in many respects the situation resembles that of former hostages, prisoners, exiles, soldiers, in terms of life drastically altered, and issues of loss, reintegration and transition" (p. 10). In agreement with Galanter, Richardson (1980) explained how the Nazi's treated their prisoners similarly to how cult members are treated, violating them by not allowing them to eliminate waste without consent. So, cult-like behavior has existed in the world's political history as well, not just in the religious arena.

Above all, cults have remained private from the outside world (Kahaner, 1988), mixing only to recruit new members or make more money for the cause. Outsiders who have tried to visit have been treated with a high degree of skepticism. Overall, there was a sense of isolation, manipulation, dependency, and complete obedience to the leader (Griffis, 1985). If a member

did not obey, severe disciplinary actions were taken, sometimes even death.

As can be seen, whether a person joined a cult voluntarily, dabbled in Satanic worship, or was forcibly used by parents or strangers in rituals to promote Satan, abuse of all kinds occurred. Developing a clearer picture of the various methods of abuse involved will better serve mental health professionals in understanding the effects of the abuse and deciding what treatment could be most effective.

Forms of Abuse

Emotional

Perhaps the clearest example of emotional abuse found was the tremendous levels of deception and intimidation involved between the victims and the perpetrators (Kahaner, 1988). For instance, children were told if they did not do what they were asked, their houses would be burned or their parents would be killed. Nurcombe and Unutzer (1991) discovered how one adult survivor explained she was told (after waking up with blood all over her) she had had a bomb surgically inserted into her stomach and if she made any mistakes it would explode. The threats, manipulation, isolation, and overall dependency on those who are simultaneously

causing the distress, were all forms of emotional abuse (Dumont & Altesman, 1989).

As a result, individuals who have escaped cult existence have found themselves free from bondage physically, but not necessarily psychologically. The weeks, months, or years of constant mind control, manipulation and absence of free thought have cursed survivors into a life of confusion in which they are unable to trust others or themselves, establish quality relationships of any kind, or even make sound, responsible decisions (Galanter, 1989b). Galanter also pointed out some survivors of ritual abuse developed multiple personality disorder during their experiences and when they returned to regular societal living, many were unable to integrate the various personalities and live a unified existence.

Physical

In the cult community, part of physical abuse involved malnutrition, sleep deprivation, and lack of medical care. Disciplinary measures were also extremely abusive including severe beatings, starvation, forced drug use, and near fatal brutality (Dumont & Altesman, 1989). For children used in rituals, skin and blood portions were taken for Satan and they were forced to

eat one another's feces, urine, and body parts (Wheeler, Wood, & Hatch, 1988). Children's lives were sacrificed as well for the sake of Satan.

Sexual

People in some cults were sexually deprived (considered a sin) while in other cults members were forced to have sex with the leader or other combinations of members including forced homosexuality and bisexuality (Daniels, 1989). Cozolino (1989) further noted ritual abuse of children involved child pornography, sex with animals, sexual torture, incest, group rapes, and removal of sex organs for ceremonial purposes. On occasion, children were also made to eat an animal's or a human's sex organs (Hicks, 1991). Every possible sexual act was performed during Satanic worship. Whitfield (1987) witnessed how the result of this abuse is often horrible guilt and shame for the child which is many times carried on to adulthood.

Effects of the Abuse

Psychological

Victims of ritual abuse have often suffered with neurotic, psychotic, or suicidal tendencies (Wheeler, Wood, & Hatch, 1988). Some experience hallucinations, panic, dissociation, guilt, paranoia, and identity

diffusion. Although there is no specific diagnosis in the DSMIII-R, survivors displayed those symptoms associated with dissociative disorders, multiple personality disorder, and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (Galanter, 1989a).

On a less pathological order, Kemble (1990) found survivors experienced a loss of free will, inability to establish relationships, poor judgment, diminished intellectual ability, loss of sense of humor, and extreme fears of objects like knives, robes, masks, water, blood, or things associated with death. According to Hopponen (1989), other psychological clues included terror, shame, guilt, grief, rage, lack of trust, or possibly no symptoms at all. Also, self-esteem was often an issue as was an overcompliance to authority or a withdrawn presence. The list of effects or symptoms was lengthy in all sources.

Behavioral

Survivors indicated they would rather be tortured than left alone. They have also discussed hurting, killing, or cooking babies (Kemble, 1990). Playing dead, chanting, self-mutilation, wanting to be tied up, and acting like a dog or cat, were all signs of ritual abuse. Chromey (1989) believed owning Satanic objects,

keeping a shrine in their room, reading Satanic books or listening to Satanic (heavy metal) rock music, all indicated a history of involvement in ritual abuse. Dumont and Altesman (1989) added that harmful behavioral changes like dropping grades, failing to work at par level, or socially withdrawing from others could result from involvement in a destructive cult.

Physical

Having experienced chronic pain, migraines, eating disorders, hormonal dysfunction, and multiple scars, brands, or missing body parts were all possible indicators that ritual abuse of one form or another had occurred (Hopponen, 1989). Hopponen further explained the person abused could have had digestion difficulties, severe weight problems, repeated urinary infections, and perhaps missing nipples. Self-mutilation probably occurred, but overall chronic health problems not otherwise explainable did indicate an abusive environment and history.

Sexual

A preoccupation with urine and feces, a desire for sex with adults, and an excessive amount of masturbation were good indicators of abuse (Kemble, 1990). Persons may have complained about vaginal or anal pain, and may

have avoided bathing regularly. Nurcombe and Unutzer (1991) stated many children became sexually provocative having an overwhelming understanding of sexual behavior and anatomy. Children have also removed own clothing or attempted to remove other's clothing at inappropriate times.

Spiritual

Survivors may have turned to Jesus or God fanatically as a result of involvement with Satan or a cult (Kahaner, 1988). The main reason was because the person was accustomed to living with detailed structure based on a certain leader or belief system. Establishing the new belief system then, provided the survivor with the necessary balance. Toward the other extreme, the person may not have sought any new belief system, withdrawing from organized religion altogether.

Treatment

For the Family

Discovering a child or sibling involved with a cult could ignite responses from total disbelief to practical concern within the family system (Galanter, 1989a). In the case of a child engaging in cult activity, professional intervention with the family was limited to providing a supportive atmosphere for the family to work

through their issues of anger, guilt, and grief, and to educate them about different cults and the effects of that type of involvement on cult members and on the family (Dumont & Altesman, 1989). Professionals also encouraged families to open the communication with their child/sibling and remain nonjudgmental as much as possible, so if the child decides to leave the cult, they will realize they have an alternative, a place to return (Galanter, 1989a).

Deprogramming

Mental health professionals do not involve themselves in this process, other than therapeutically with the family beforehand and with the survivor afterwards. However, families can hire deprogramming professionals to "kidnap" the cult member back into society. Ellwood and Partin (1988) explained how ethical and legal issues made this a controversial process for it could be considered a violation of the person's civil and religious rights, which is another reason for a therapist to hesitate before becoming involved. When deprogramming occurred, the survivors experienced shock and relief being out of the cult experience. Integration was a difficult process though,

and therapy was a part of the recovery period for the survivor and the family.

For the Victim

As previously mentioned, survivors of ritual abuse have exhibited symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, multiple personality disorder and other dissociative disorders (Hicks, 1991). Galanter (1989a) further indicated mental health professionals should proceed with caution and not make an immediate clinical diagnosis of mental illness solely because of cult involvement. Most importantly, the therapist was to provide a trusting, supportive atmosphere in which the clients could disclose the activities involved and even experience flashbacks (Cozolino, 1989). Many treatment issues are related to sexual abuse issues only more compounded by the bizarre acts and occurrences in the person's life.

As Kemble (1990) suggested, therapists used their most calming voices with clients and provided heavy structure in the treatment goals. Mental health professionals should also recognize it may have taken months before the person reveals the abuse fully, especially out of fear of being labelled crazy or paranoid due to the bizarre content (Kahaner, 1988), but

when it does finally happen, the strongest quality needed is unconditional positive regard, a nonjudgmental, trusting atmosphere. Another important point made by Galanter (1989b) is the cult may harass the mental health professional involved.

Prognosis

According to the literature, the recovery of ritual abuse survivors most likely could involve years of treatment. Clients suffer silently and attempt to adjust to a different world before even being able to reveal their abusive histories. Some may learn to live with their numerous personalities. Few will ever integrate them and lead what many of us would label "a normal life," but professionals must keep in mind people who participated in these activities are not necessarily severely psychiatrically disturbed (Dumont & Altesman, 1989). Some will go on to abuse their own children in many of the same ways in which they were abused. Fortunately, some will survive, look back on their experiences reflectively finding an appreciation in the positive and negative, and challenge themselves to find a better, healthier existence (Galanter, 1989b).

Prevention

Family's Role

Some suggestions on how to prevent children from entering a cult or practicing Satanic worship included educating children about cults and Satan and remaining open to communication about it. Also parents should offer children a faith in God throughout their life (Chromey, 1989). The philosophy behind this was if children are presented with a solid spiritual structure and good role models, they will not seek out this meaning or belief system. Additionally, parents should provide unconditional love and acceptance and remain approachable throughout their children's lives (Wheeler, Wood, & Hatch, 1988). By giving a child some autonomy with a level of responsibility within the family structure, chances are better the child will not need to seek out power, freedom of expression, or belonging elsewhere. However, even under the most healthy familial situations, children have turned to a cult or Satan, so if this happened to a child, parents should use their energy to help the loved one, rather than point out blame (Dumont & Altesman, 1989).

Society's Role

Child abuse continues to happen in the private and secret world it lives in; the inattention offered it keeps it alive (Gil, 1979). Therefore, the bottom line in our society in preventing Satanic involvement is education. We need to acknowledge the existence of these forces and educate children and their families on how to guard against it. This can be taught in schools, businesses, churches, and homes. We must provide our youth with alternatives, as well as the parents, so neither have to turn to Satan or any of the horrible acts accompanying this type of worship to find their purpose or meaning to life (Goering, 1989).

Conclusion

The literature included a variety of definitions and explanations for ritual abuse. Perhaps the numerous interpretations have led to a greater level of confusion and frustration for mental health professionals in terms of what intervention would be most effective for survivors. However, consistency within the readings existed when referring to the characteristics and purposes of ritual abuse. Clinicians must develop a solid base of knowledge (Richardson, 1980), so when treating individuals and hearing their issues they can

establish whether this type of abuse was a part of their clients' histories, determine the effects it may have had on them, and develop appropriate treatment plans.

Recognizing the emotional impact ritual abuse can have on people should ignite a more successful therapeutic intervention. For example, realizing how difficult trusting others can be for survivors, mental health professionals can work especially sensitively around rapport establishment with clients. Providing a nonjudgmental atmosphere and remaining patient with the clients, will enhance the treatment process (Furniss, 1991).

Accepting the reality that ritual abuse takes place in many forms with people from all racial, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds, may be the most essential aspect of stopping the process. As mental health professionals, we need to remain aware of the complexities of Satanic abuse and be open to approaching the tremendous impact it has on survivors. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to suggest Satanic worshippers or cultists have stopped recruiting young people or that slaying of innocent victims has lessened to any degree (Terry, 1987). Therefore, as Deikman (1990) pointed out, to solve these problems we

need as much realism as possible in terms of how universally embedded ritual abuse has become in our society, but unfortunately, realism is the first casualty of this destructive behavior.

I believe the world must strive toward treating children as total human beings, as we as adults want to and expect to be treated. Gil (1979) agreed with me, saying he felt the solution to abuse is a democracy in which basic human rights is guaranteed for all people, not excluding children. Gil further pointed out how our political philosophies coincide with this democracy when he wrote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (submitted by the United Nations in 1949) in his book. It states: "No one shall be subject to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment" (p. 143). This is my hope for all of us, but especially the children.

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