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Frontiers in the Psychotherapy of Trauma & Dissociation

*The Official Clinical Journal of
the International Society for the
Study of Trauma and Dissociation*

Understanding Reports of Satanic Ritual Abuse

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International Society for the
Study of Trauma and Dissociation

TRAUMA AND DISSOCIATION. IT HEALS HERE.

Frontiers in the Psychotherapy of Trauma & Dissociation

The Official Clinical Journal of the ISSTD

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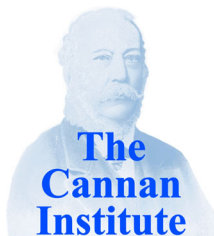
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COMMENTARY

Understanding Reports of Satanic Ritual Abuse

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The paper by Ross and the subsequent commentaries by Miller and Ross throw up some challenging issues, some of which have been there from the earliest days of the modern dissociative disorders field. From the 1980s onwards, alleged Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) has had a polarizing impact. I see it as healthy to theorize based on clinical observations and helpful that *Frontiers* facilitates the publishing of perspectives stimulated by Ross' paper. My short commentary focuses on the historical backdrop to the issue of alleged SRA and how the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD) has interfaced with such allegations.

Three decades ago, in an editorial dated December 1989 in the journal *Dissociation*, Richard Kluft stated, "Clinicians in many parts of North America and in European countries as well are hearing remarkably similar accounts of ritualistic abuse from many patients" (p. 191). He concluded, "I end this series of observations and reflections with the fervent hope that moderate and responsible voices will prevail in the further discussion of this issue. I accept the inevitability of controversy and disagreement in the matter of allegations of ritual abuse, and look forward to the time when this matter will be clarified and resolved. In the meantime, we must do our best for the patients who present with allegations of ritual abuse, and must do so in the midst of great uncertainty. Many aspects of the dilemma raised by such allegations are not within the province of the mental health professions to explore. Much of the responsibility for the resolution of the matter of ritual abuse will fall upon the law enforcement community, which must respond to numerous pressing mandates of far higher priority, and do so

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with unrealistically stringent budgets and manpower constraints that hamper their best-intentioned efforts. It is understandable, albeit unfortunate, that many years may pass before we are able to understand patients' allegations of ritual abuse as well as we understand their accounts of incest and more familiar abuses and exploitations (about which we still have much to learn)" (p. 192).

Another pioneer member of the dissociative disorders field, who from the late 1980s was publicly urging great caution in respect to reports of SRA was Frank Putnam (e.g., Putnam, 1991). Over two decades ago he reflected, "From my perspective, the best example of the creation of clinically and legally significant pseudo-memories involves allegations of satanic ritual abuse (SRA). Such allegations are defined here as claims that a vast, international, multigenerational conspiracy is practicing religious worship of Satan or the devil through rituals involving sex, death, torture, incest, human sacrifice, cannibalism, and necrophilia. With the exception of a few isolated 'copycat' incidents, there is no credible evidence that actual SRA is occurring or ever has occurred" (Putnam, 1997, p. 124). Putnam found that only a few multiple personality disorder (MPD) patients made SRA allegations, citing Coons' 1994 study (which arrived at a figure of 8.5% of his own MPD patients making such claims), and a later study he was personally involved with (Sariganian & Putnam, 1997, unpublished manuscript quoted in Putnam, 1997), producing a figure of only 4%.

When I recall my own early clinical experiences, I am reminded of how much the issue of "false memories" was something that I wrestled with—particularly as I had witnessed from afar the sort of career-threatening scenarios that a number of U.S. therapists encountered. I was keen not to be subjected to a similar experience. I will be incorporating my early experiences and lessons from that controversy in a planned, more detailed paper for *Frontiers*. It is very instructive, I believe, for those coming into this field at this point, by way of background, to read *Michelle Remembers* (Smith & Padger, 1980), to watch the October 1988 Geraldo Rivera's two-hour special titled *Exposing Satan's Underground*, to read the June 1992 "Greenbaum speech" by Cory Hammond that Ross references, and to watch the 1995 Frontline special, *The Search for Satan*. D. Corydon Hammond who appeared in the 1988 Rivera special concluded with, "One thing I would add, we are now having these reports from literally hundreds of therapists in every part of the United States."

Hammond, at the Fourth Annual Eastern Regional Conference on Abuse and Multiple Personality adopted a heroic stance: "I finally decided to hell with them. If they're going to kill me, they're going to kill me. It's time to share more information with therapists. Part of that comes because we proceed so cautiously and slowly, checking things in many different locations and find the same thing. So I'm going to give you the way in with ritual-abuse programming."

Ross' paper does not unequivocally differentiate between maladaptive daydreaming (MD) and dissociative identity disorder (DID), but it raises interesting discussion points about the elaborate inner world seen in some patients with DID. As it ventured into the areas of alleged SRA and mind control, given the history of dialogue about these matters, it was likely to promote discussion, something that was a particular objective of the paper.

Both Miller and Ross comment on ongoing incestuous abuse during adulthood, a form of extreme abuse, that only in recent years has been the focus of systematic research. In approaching the issue of publishing research in this area, I was extremely mindful of how things thus far have played out in the reporting of alleged SRA. Paradoxical as it may seem, it seemed that the most effective way in which to unequivocally demonstrate that this form of abuse was widespread, was to establish a foundation that involved publishing in the first instance, a detailed analysis of the phenomena by drawing together mainstream news reports (based on court findings and police statements) which demonstrated common features of this form of abuse as well as its average duration (Middleton, 2013a). Having done this, there was a strong reference point for then publishing a more detailed analysis of this form of abuse based around a clinical series of 10 victims of such abuse (Middleton, 2013b). Key findings from the analysis of press reports were congruent with key findings based on the clinical series (which incorporated considerable corroboration). Interestingly, to date, there has not, to my knowledge, been a single published criticism of the approach taken, or my reported findings.

Compared to the world of 30 years ago, where reports of SRA had stimulated a sensationalized national television special on the subject, much more is now known about extreme forms of abuse. Many inquiries in multiple countries have demonstrated that child sexual abuse has been endemic amongst the clergy of many faiths, but particularly so with the Catholic Church, where in an unprecedented way we are now seeing the regular prosecution of bishops and cardinals in civil courts in respect to the abuse of children or in aiding its cover-up. After 2,000 years of existence, the Catholic Church is facing its biggest crisis since the Reformation, and the issue is the manner in which the organization has sexually abused numerous children and orchestrated the systematic cover-up of the crimes. As the Pope was being called upon to resign by a senior bishop, one commentator (CNN, 2018) characterized 2018 as the "church's year from hell." I believe, that despite areas that require more accurate quantification, in respect to recognizing the extent of organized abuse, in this digitally connected age, we have reached a "tipping point" (see Middleton, 2015), where it is now impossible to realistically deny the widespread evidence of such abuse, notwithstanding the reality that we are now at the level of encountering rearguard "cover-ups of cover-ups" (CNN, 2018).

In the last three decades, and particularly in recent years, powerful and frequently politically-connected individuals have been credibly exposed/charged and/or convicted in respect to sexual abuse in numbers that are unprecedented.¹ Numerous individuals in public service or in respected professions have suddenly in the digital age been caught out in sexual predations involving children/adolescents. Handrahan (2018) details numerous US examples. Representative examples from my own country include Dr. Aaron Voon, a prominent child psychiatrist, who was using his smart phone in multiple different countries to secretly record young boys urinating (Perth Now, 2016), Michael Quin, a respected geneticist visiting the U.S., who was arrested in a sting operation when he thought he was buying a six-year old boy from his father (Crane, 2016), and Shannon McCooie, an Adelaide-based Families South Australia supervisor who was head administrator of a highly sophisticated global child pornography website ("The Love Zone") with some 45,000 members world-wide when he was arrested (Hunt, 2017). Dr. Ong Ming Tan, a prominent Sydney psychiatrist groomed, abused, and in some cases drugged, a substantial number of female patients, some as teenagers, at prestigious clinics on Sydney's North Shore (Rubinsztein & McGregor, 2016).

In 2011, "Operation Rescue" was publicly revealed, involving an international police operation that destroyed the then largest pedophile-oriented network in world history, one that had in excess of 70,000 members (Casciani, 2011). When the FBI closed down the internet-based child-exploitation ring known as "Playpen" in 2015, it had 215,000 members worldwide (Handrahan, 2018).

There are multiple examples of organized groups preying on large numbers of vulnerable children, e.g., in Islington, Telford, and Rochdale (Middleton, 2015) or Rotherham UK where an inquiry revealed 1,400 child victims (Middleton, Sachs, & Dorahy, 2018). Clearly in the digital age, abusers are organized and can find and communicate with each other in numbers that are unprecedented (Sar, Middleton, & Dorahy, 2014).

We now have verified documentation over the last three decades of multiple examples of groups of child sexual abusers operating with the

¹Examples include Jimmy Savile, Max Clifford, Gary Glitter, Stuart Hall, Lawrence King, Professor Benjamin Levin, Rolf Harris, Dr. Larry Nasser, Jeffrey Epstein, Dan Rosen, Harvey Weinstein, Cyril Smith, Robert Geist, Warren Jeffs, Dr. Earl Bradley, Dr. Pieter Rossouw, Peter Dalglish, Professor Mark Ranzenberer, Dr. Ian Styart McAlpine, Br. Michael Evans, Bishop Raymond Lahey, Fr. Fernando Karadima, Gordon Oehmig, Bill Cosby, Dr. Jules Masserman, Dr. Malcolm Dent, Kevin Spacey, Keith Wright, Jean Succar Kuri, Br. Gregory Vincent Coffey, Jerry Sandusky, Scott Volkens, Bob Collins AO, Brian Doyle, Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, Timothy DeFoggi, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Col. Robert Joel Rice, Dr. Graeme Lawrence, Bishop Peter Ball, Professor Paul Wilson, Monsignor Jozef Wesolowski, Malka Leifer, Tony Bevan, Frank Arkell and Freud's grandson, Clement Freud.

protection of religious, political or other organizations². It is abundantly clear that despite the fact that Freud and many of his fellow early analysts were themselves sexually abused as children (Middleton, 2016), and despite the passage of nearly a century in which psychoanalysis deemphasised actual child sexual abuse (Simon, 1992), that incest is very common.

Bennett Braun, writing in 2014, commented on the earlier withdrawal of professionals from the dissociative disorders field, "In my opinion, the major reason the Dissociative Disorders suffered, what has proved to be a temporarily reduced presence in the mental health mainstream, was due to the epidemic of false memory lawsuits, which for several years intimidated therapists and discouraged them from working with this patient population. In response to those lawsuits all too often insurers discouraged fighting these suits and settled them out rather than mount aggressive defenses of their policyholders. Whether this was due to their lack of courage or on the basis of their estimation of the costs of various options is a subject for another time. Unfortunately the results of these tactics often were the ruining of professional reputations and raised insurance rates."

Clearly, in the early years of the ISSTD, accounts given by some individuals in treatment regarding alleged SRA were interpreted in ways that tended to create a polarization between "believers" and "sceptics." Scientific objectivity was likely limited in those rigidly wedded to either of these world-views. In 2011, Kluft (pp. 8–9) helpfully summarized his key observations on trauma and the accuracy of memory, based on the literature and his own extensive involvement in treating over a period of decades individuals with dissociative disorders. His synthesis was:

The details, vividness, and resemblance of a memory to known events do not demonstrate that a memory is accurate or inaccurate;

A patient's conviction that a memory is accurate or inaccurate does not demonstrate that a memory is accurate or inaccurate;

Neither a fragmentary quality often associated with traumatic memory nor a quality of narrative completeness sometimes linked to inaccurate memory for trauma demonstrates that a memory is accurate or inaccurate;

Neither a dreamlike, unreal, foggy, nor surreal quality to a memory demonstrates that a memory is accurate or inaccurate;

²The broad spectrum of well-documented societal abuses include the repeated use of "ethnic cleansing" (including genocide and rape used as a weapon of war), the repeated use of child soldiers, endemic sexual abuse within the military, widespread sexual trafficking and other forms of slavery, health professionals (including psychiatrists) being repeatedly deregistered for sexual involvement with patients, systemic sexual abuse of children in schools, orphanages or within sporting or scouting organizations, as well as sexual and other abuses occurring in a range of cults.

The discovery that one memory is accurate does not demonstrate that the patient's memory is generally accurate;

The discovery that one memory is not accurate does not demonstrate that the patient's memory is generally inaccurate;

The corroboration or non-corroboration of a memory of abuse by others allegedly present at the time is not adequate grounds for validating or for dismissing the memory unless the witnesses can be shown to have no incentive to misrepresent matters. (Kluft, 2011, pp. 8–9).

I do not think that the ISSTD has adopted a revisionist stance and is in some way using “organised abuse” as a sanitised cover in order to speak of alleged SRA, etc. Allegations of SRA need to be subjected to the same scientific rigour as say, the investigation of alleged ongoing incest during adulthood. Many involved with what had previously been named the ISSTD Ritual Abuse and Mind Control Special Interest Group (RAMC SIG) saw “organized abuse” as a central orienting component that both included and extended the reference points provided by the descriptors “ritual abuse” and “mind control,” which were part of the picture in some cases of extreme abuse. The move to renaming the SIG was, overall, very well received. I think for quite a period, some years back, a defensive “bunker” mentality understandably prevailed after the climax of the SRA/“memory wars” debates and the resultant fallout which encouraged remaining Society members to be cautious and appropriately guarded in the nature of public utterances.

We need to remember that in the wake of the memory wars there was a significant contraction in membership of the ISSTD, and only in relatively recent times has there been steady growth in membership, which now stands in excess of 1,300 members, up from a low point of under 1,000 six years ago. It needs to be pointed out that there are additionally approximately 500 members of the European Society for Trauma and Dissociation (ESTD). Controversies regarding so called “recovered memory therapy” and allegations regarding SRA were far more limited in my native Australia than in the USA, though one did encounter the odd published criticism (Middleton & Butler, 1995). In a series concerning the abuse histories and clinical phenomenology of 62 individuals with DID published in 1998 (Middleton & Butler, 1998), only one such individual had presented with the firmly-held belief that she had been satanically abused. She was undoubtedly traumatized—with a long, documented history of recurrent psychiatric admissions and of suicide attempts. Highly dissociative, her accounts of satanic abuse were invariably fragmentary and vague. None of the 62 reported anything in the spectrum of alleged UFO abductions.

Australia, in 2017, concluded what was the most comprehensive and well-run inquiry into institutional responses to child sexual abuse thus far

in human history. The six royal commissioners and senior special counsel assisting were the recipients of the ISSTD 2018 Media Award (Written). Currently, 10% of the members of the ISSTD are Australian.

My experience has been that the ISSTD Board, certainly in the time I was associated with it, maintained, in an ongoing fashion, a disciplined and grounded approach regarding the wish to not only assist the growth of the Ritual Abuse, Mind Control and Organized Abuse (RAMCOA) SIG, but to also foster communication and for it to have a central place in the ISSTD, which is a scientifically-based society that publishes regularly two peer-reviewed journals. By a long stretch, the RAMCOA SIG has the largest membership of any SIG and had for years operated its own moderated list-serv. The Board in recent years has had very regular communications via tele/video-conferences with the SIG Executive. I have no sense that including the term “Organized Abuse” was meant to validate SRA. “Organized Abuse” is a widely accepted term, and it encompasses a large range of victims. Some forms of reported organized abuse are much more clearly validated than others. Some colleagues have a particular connection with the terms “Ritual Abuse” and “Mind Control,” and yes there are many examples where something approximating ritual or “Mind Control” are seen in those subjected to organized abuse. There are examples of organized abuse crimes that incorporate satanic symbols, just as there are examples of organized abuse crimes that incorporate Christian symbols. Personally, I prefer the simple term “conditioning” to “Mind Control,” and I feel a little uneasy by the association historically between the term “Ritual Abuse” and the saga of Dr. Padger who introduced it in 1981 (Nathan & Snedeker, 1995), but I fully accept that other respected colleagues have a different connection to this terminology.

When we, as an international society, are dealing with the impacts of multiple atrocities, many centered on the family, and many centered on society’s institutions and powerful and charismatic individuals associated with them, we will attract the attention of those that have vested interests in silencing those that could assist in holding them accountable. In this business, we need all the friends we can get.

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