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MORAL PANICS AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DEVIANT BEHAVIOR: A Theory and Application to the Case of Ritual Child Abuse

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ABSTRACT: *The objective of the article is to develop a theory of the causes and transmission of moral panics. The theory is designed to explain forms of collective behavior, previously labeled panics, scares and persecutions. Part one of this article presents criteria for the identification of moral panics. Part two of the article offers models for analyzing the social conditions, which cause moral panics and lead to the social construction of definitions of deviance. Finally, part three examines the social processes by which moral panics are transmitted between different societies. In order to illustrate the theoretical analysis, the article presents information about the current moral panic involving criminal accusations of ritual child abuse by secret, satanic cults.*

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The past offers numerous examples of collective behavior during which widespread, fearful rumors and accusations about dangerous deviants resulted in false accusations of crime against many innocent people. Various terms have been used to label this form of collective behavior: persecution, witch-hunt, scare, and panic. In some cases, the widely feared deviants are products of ethnic, racial or religious stereotypes. The most familiar example is that of anti-Semitic persecutions, including the Nazi program of genocide. In other cases, the invented deviants are creations of pure imagination. The classic example is the European witch-hunt, during which perhaps over one hundred thousand people were executed, because they were believed to posses evil magical powers (Ben-Yehuda 1981; Levack 1987). In still other cases, the deviants are stereotypes of members of groups that are widely believed to be a political threat in a society. An example is the anti-Communist 'Red Scare' in the U.S of the 1950s, during which many thousands of Americans were labeled as subversives and lost their jobs (Caute 1978).

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In this article, I suggest a rationale for classifying all these forms of collective behavior together as moral panics. The objective of the article is to develop a theory of the causes and transmission of moral panics. The article first presents criteria for identifying moral panics. Secondly, the article presents models for analyzing the social conditions that cause moral panics and lead to the social construction of definitions of deviance. Finally, the article offers principles for understanding the international transmission of moral panics. In order to illustrate the theoretical analysis, the article presents information about the recent moral panic involving criminal accusations of ritual child abuse by secret, satanic cults.

PART I: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MORAL PANICS

In simplification, a moral panic is a societal response to beliefs about a threat from moral deviants[1]. The term "moral panic" was coined by British sociologist Stanley Cohen in his book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers*, a study of British public reaction to the deviant behavior of the "mods" and "rockers" youth. Cohen used the term to identify a form of collective behavior characterized by widely circulating rumor stories disseminated by the mass media, which exaggerated the threat posed by some newly identified type of moral deviants (Cohen 1972). Cohen defined a moral panic as a form of collective behavior during which:

> A condition, episode, person or group emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes visible (Cohen 1972: 9).

Cohen employed a societal reaction/labeling perspective on deviance, which was an early antecedent of current social constructionism.

The concept of a moral panic has been widely used by British sociologists. However, American sociologists have regarded it as suffering from a lack of precise indicators and made little use of it until recently. In an attempt to make the concept less ambiguous, Goode and Ben-Yehuda have suggested the following five specific indicators of a moral panic (summarized from Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994:33-39).

1. **Volatility**—The sudden eruption and subsiding of concern about a newly perceived threat to society from a category of people regarded as being moral deviants.
2. **Hostility**—The deviants are regarded with intense hostility as enemies of the basic values of the society and attributed stereotypes of 'evil' behavior.
3. **Measurable Concern**—Concern about the threat is measurable in concrete ways, such as attitude surveys.

4. **Consensus**—There is consensus in significant segments of the population that the threat is real and serious.
5. **Disproportionality**— Concern about the numbers of moral deviants and the extent of the harm that they do is much greater than can be verified by objective, empirical investigations of the harm. Even though the measurable concern is great, the numbers of deviants are minimal or even non-existent and their harm is very limited or even non-existent.

In brief, a moral panic is a form of collective behavior characterized by suddenly increased concern and hostility in a significant segment of a society, in reaction to widespread beliefs about a newly perceived threat from moral deviants. Careful, empirical examination at a later time, however, reveals that the perceived threat was greatly exaggerated or nonexistent. A moral panic often gives rise to social movements aimed at eliminating the threatening deviants and may generate moral crusades and political struggles over use of the law to suppress the dangerous deviants. Local rumor-panics, riots and ethnic pograms may occur in reaction to belief in the threat. However, such dramatic behavior is not an essential element of the collective behavior. Belief, not emotion, is the motivational dimension of a moral panic. The essence of a moral panic is that significant segments of a society are reacting to a socially constructed threat from moral deviants. The main observable behavior during a moral panic is the communication of claims, accusations and rumors.

The Study of Rumors and Claims about Moral Deviants

A contemporary (or urban) legend is the type of rumor that is most commonly part of a moral panic. Contemporary legends are varieties of persistent rumor stories, transmitted primarily in oral communication, and secondarily through the mass media. The stories communicate shared anxieties about a newly perceived threat. The stories also communicate a moral-political message conveyed in the form of age-old recurring motifs and metaphors (Victor 1993b). Contemporary legends are told as if stories are true, just as ordinary rumors, and widely believed as if the stories are likely to be true. However, unlike ordinary rumors, the stories are more persistent, and less relevant to specific, localized people and events.

A contemporary legend is a process of collective behavior which consists primarily of the collaborative creation and communication of rumor stories in ever changing variations (Ellis 1990). It is not a fixed and unchanging narrative. It is always emergent out of interaction and never finished. The story is constantly being reshaped, as people add parts, forget parts and distort parts. Contemporary legends are often regarded as being merely amusing tales having little social consequence, like those about poisonous spiders found in bunches of bananas or fried rats served as chicken. However, some contemporary legends can have harmful consequences, such as false accusations of crime, the destruction of reputations and property, riots and even killings. Examples of harmful contemporary legends include those that promote racist and anti-Semitic hatred.

Exaggerated claims-making about deviants is a central phenomenon during moral panics. Therefore, an analysis of the claims-making process is the focus of a

social constructionist study of deviant behavior. The content of claims about deviance include matters such as: stereotypes of deviants and their behavior, typologies of variations among deviants, descriptions of the dangers and particular harms caused by deviants and rationales for dealing with deviants. The basic premise of social constructionism is that deviance is a socially constructed meaning. These claims construct the definitions (symbolic meanings) attributed to deviance. Therefore, social constructionist research and analysis focus upon the claims-makers, rather than the behavior and people defined as deviant; the rhetoric and propaganda of the claims-makers, their vested interests, their authority and power in a society (Best 1989; Conrad and Schneider 1992).[2]

The claims made about satanic ritual abuse (hereafter abbreviated as SRA) have been studied by Hicks (1991), Jenkins (1992), Nathan and Snedeker (1995), and Victor (1993a, 1994, 1995, 1996). Most claims assert that there exist secret, criminal organizations, which commit horrible crimes against children, motivated by worship of Satan. Some claims assert the existence of an international conspiratorial network. Less extreme versions assert that the secret networks consist only of intergenerational family clans. Ritual torture and sexual abuse of children is done supposedly to "program" children to reverse good and evil. The purported aim is to "brainwash" children into the ideology of Satan worship. In their Satan-worshipping rituals, these criminals supposedly sometimes kill and sacrifice infants born to impregnated "breeders" and commit cannibalism with the body parts. Some claims-makers even assert that satanic cults kidnap runaway youth for ritual sacrifice, commit random murders of indigent people, and engage in the criminal businesses of child pornography, forced prostitution and drug dealing. These criminals are able to maintain their secrecy and avoid detection, according to the claims-makers, because satanists have infiltrated all the institutions of society.

The main evidence to support these claims consists primarily of accusations made by hundreds of adult psychotherapy patients who report decades-old memories of ritual torture and sexual abuse by their parents, and similar accusations made by children against their parents or child care workers. The authorities making these claims include some psychotherapists, social workers, local law enforcement officials, fundamentalist clergy, and members of anti-cult organizations.

The Moral Panic Over Satanic Ritual Child Abuse

There is no research on the precise number of people who have made accusations of SRA against their parents, or childcare workers and others in the United States, and there is no precise count of the number of criminal prosecutions. However, a random sample national survey of 2,272 clinical psychologists who are members of the American Psychological Association found almost 3,000 cases reported by the 802 psychotherapists, who said that they had seen at least one case of SRA. These psychotherapists reported seeing 1,228 cases of adults who they defined as victims of SRA and 1,500 cases of children who they defined as victims of SRA (Bottoms, Shaver, and Goodman 1996). The numbers of SRA cases are likely much higher, considering that many thousands of psychotherapists are psychiatrists, clinical social workers and diverse kinds of counselors.

Some SRA accusations have been taken to the criminal courts. A national survey of a sample of 706 district attorneys, 1,037 social service workers and 2,912 law enforcement agencies found that 302 respondents had encountered at least one SRA case (Goodman, Qin, Bottoms, and Shaver, 1995). A legal survey done by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation of criminal cases involving allegations of child sexual abuse made by adults based upon purported recovered memories offers more useful data, at least about accusations made by adults against their parents. A legal survey of 78 criminal cases done in September, 1996, found that in the United States from 1989 through early 1996, 47 cases (60%) involved adult allegations of ritual abuse (FMSF, personal communication, 9/96). By the early 1990s, many adult former psychotherapy patients had retracted their memories of SRA and filed malpractice lawsuits against their former therapists and hospitals. Another legal survey done by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation conducted on 59 civil lawsuits between 1991 and 1997 found 34 cases (57%) involved purported memories of SRA (FMSF Legal Survey 1998).

The rapid rise and decline of SRA accusations gives evidence to the volatility of a moral panic. Claims about ritual child abuse by satanic cults began to appear rather suddenly. The oldest known satanic cult "survivor" account was published in 1980 in the book, *Michelle Remembers* (Smith and Pazder 1980). SRA testimonials, accusations and rumors spread rapidly thereafter in the United States during the early 1980s and then declined rapidly during the early 1990s.

There is evidence of widespread concern and hostility in response to SRA accusations. It can be found in satanic cult crime accounts in the mass media: in popular books and magazine articles, in small-town newspaper articles, and on television talk shows (Hicks 1991; Victor 1993a). Evidence can also be found in records from SRA professional training seminars for psychotherapists and social workers offered at professional conferences, and in continuing education programs at colleges (Mulhern 1991, 1994; Nathan and Snedeker 1995). Further evidence can be found in the hundreds of accusations of SRA against parents and childcare workers, many of which have led to civil and criminal trials.

There is evidence that SRA accusations were regarded as being "real and serious" by sizable segments of the American population. A 1994 national survey reported in *Redbook* magazine, for example, found that 70 percent of Americans "believe that at least some people who claim that they were abused by satanic cults as children, but repressed the memories for years, are telling the truth" (Ross 1994:88). Further evidence of widespread belief in the existence of the SRA comes from a 1989 Texas statewide telephone poll, which found that 80% of the respondents believed that Satanism is an increasing problem in American society (reported in Crouch and Damphousse 1992). In addition, survey research has found that a sizable percentage of American and British psychotherapists, social workers and counselors believe SRA accounts, in part or whole, as accurate accounts of satanic cult crime; or at least attribute credibility to them (Andrews, Morton, Bekerian, Brewin, Davies, and Mollon 1995; Bottoms, Shaver, and Goodman 1996; Poole, Lindsay, Memon, and Bull 1995). This research means that thousands of professionals who claim authority in understanding human behavior believe that there exists a real threat from satanic cult child abusers.

Finally, there is evidence that the societal reaction to the claims was disproportionate to the threat posed by SRA. So far, no law enforcement agency or research study has found the kind of physical evidence needed to support accounts of SRA. No one has turned up written or electronic communications, bank account records, meetings in process, members who can identify leaders, or any of the vast number of bodies of people supposed murdered by satanic cults. Official government reports from several countries could find no such evidence to support claims about SRA. These reports include those from the Department of Health of the United Kingdom (La Fontaine 1994); from the Netherlands Ministry of Justice (1994); from the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI (Lanning 1992); and state agencies in Michigan (Michigan State Police 1990), Virginia (Virginia State Crime Commission Task Force 1991), and Washington (Parr 1996). In addition, a national survey of psychotherapists could not find a single SRA accusation reported by the psychotherapists, where there was reliable evidence to corroborate SRA accusations from either children or adults (Bottoms, Shaver, and Goodman 1996). In the reports of psychotherapists about their patients' SRA accusations, there is no convincing external corroborating evidence for the existence of satanic cult criminals, in either organizations or intergenerational family clans.

The only social phenomena that exists which bares any resemblance to SRA claims are teenage delinquents and mentally disordered killers who call themselves "satanists". However, these deviants do not constitute an organization, a criminal network or a religious cult. Therefore, in the absence of any scientific evidence to confirm the existence of organized groups that torture and sexually abuse children in satanic rituals, it is reasonable to suggest that the societal reaction to SRA claims has been excessive.

PART II: THE CAUSES OF MORAL PANICS

Theoretical Models of Moral Panics

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) offer three theoretical models for analyzing the causes of moral panics: 1) the grass roots model, 2) the elite-engineered model and 3) the interest group model. These models can be used to understand different types of moral panics.

The Grass Roots Model—suggests that a moral panic arises spontaneously across a broad spectrum of a society's population. The concern and anger about the threat from perceived moral deviants is a response to persistent and widespread social stresses. Anxieties arising from these social stresses are not able to gain direct expression. Instead, the anxieties are displaced and directed toward social deviants, who become regarded as the cause of concern. Newly detected deviants essentially function as collective scapegoats for the anxieties transferred to them (Victor 1992). The targeted deviants are perceived through cultural symbols, which reflect the real, underlying social stresses.

The actions of special interest groups are not necessary to promote moral outrage directed at the newly perceived dangerous deviants. The mass media and

social control authorities basically reflect public opinion about the reality of the threat. The key argument of the grass roots model is that these agencies cannot fabricate public concern where none previously existed. However, particular triggering events, or catalysts, may provoke sudden outbreaks of the moral outrage. The role of a contemporary legend in the grass roots model of a moral panic is its function as a catalyst for a sudden outbreak of collective behavior, such as in an aggressive mob.

An example of a grass roots moral panic occurred in France in 1968, when widespread rumors in several cities accused Jewish clothing store owners of kidnapping teenage girls in their stores and selling them into forced prostitution, controlled by international criminal syndicates (Morin 1971). Mobs attacked Jewish-owned clothing stores. The contemporary legend story was based on centuries-old ethnic stereotypes and folklore about Jews as kidnappers of Christian children (Hsia 1988; Langmuir 1990). A similar grass-roots moral panic resulted in a series of over sixty local and regional rumor-panics across the United States from 1983 through 1993, in response to a contemporary legend about secret, criminal satanic cults which supposedly kidnapped blond, blue-eyed virgins, for use in ritual sacrifice (Victor 1989; 1991; 1993a). Another example is the moral panic involving contemporary legend stories about sadists who purportedly give children poisoned or dangerous treats for Halloween trick-or-treat, which sometimes lead to local scares about Halloween sadists (Best and Horiucht 1985).

The Elite-Engineered Model—suggests that a powerful elite can orchestrate a moral panic. The elite uses the major institutions of a society to promote a campaign to generate and sustain public moral outrage about a threat from a target category of deviants. The actual intention of the campaign is to divert attention away from real problems in a society, the solution of which would threaten the economic and political interests of the elite. The elite fabricates a description of the threat and uses the institutions of society, including the mass media, religion, and law enforcement, to shape public opinion. The threat from supposed dangerous deviants is invented, or at least exaggerated, by the elite, to serve its own vested interests. A contemporary legend can be employed by a powerful elite to influence public opinion about a fictitious threat, in order to divert attention from social problems.

In Medieval times, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church organized moral panics and persecutions directed at the Cathar heretics and later the Knights Templars. Another example of an elite-engineered moral panic occurred after Czarist agents used the Jewish conspiracy legend to arouse moral outrage against the Jews, as a means of diverting attention and anger away from the problem of widespread poverty in Russia. The moral panic lead to organized mob attacks and massacres of Jewish villagers. Other moral panics orchestrated by an elite which led to ethnic mass murder, include the murder of about a million Chinese Indonesians in 1965 organized by the Muslim-led army, and the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Tutsi citizens in Rwanda in 1994 organized by Hutu leaders. The Stalinist purges and persecution of millions of fabricated internal enemies of the Soviet Union is another example. An example of this type of moral panic in American society is that of 1950s anti-Communist witch-hunt in American soci-

ety. This moral panic has been interpreted (albeit a controversial interpretation) as having been deliberately orchestrated by the American corporate and political elite, as a way of destroying socialist and union organizing (Gibson 1988; Irons 1974).

The Interest Group Model—suggests that moral panics are an unintended consequence of moral crusades launched by specific interest groups and their activists, who attempt to focus public attention on moral evils that they perceive to be threats to society. In modern times, many interest groups direct their efforts toward presenting their concerns in the mass media in order to influence public opinion. Interest groups and their moral entrepreneurs usually sincerely believe that their efforts serve a moral cause beneficial to the whole society. Nevertheless, their efforts also function to advance their own group's social influence, prestige, wealth and ideological goals. As these interest groups become increasingly successful in influencing public opinion, they stimulate resistance and conflict from competing interest groups. The interest group model suggests that a moral threat expressed in a pre-existing contemporary legend story may be consistent with the moral concerns of certain interest groups and can be employed by them as an instrument to influence public opinion. The contemporary legend may also serve to enhance an interest group's credibility and authority in some special area of moral concern.

An example of a moral panic prompted by interest groups is the "white slavery" scare, which occurred in the U.S from 1907 to 1914. The white slavery scare was a product of a moral crusade against prostitution promoted by fundamentalist Protestants and the women's Suffragette movement. During this scare, the mass media aroused public opinion by publishing many stories claiming that organized criminal syndicates kidnapped young women and forced them into prostitution. Hundreds of unmarried, cohabiting young men, as well as adulterous lovers were accused of engaging in white slavery; some of whom were arrested and imprisoned (Langum 1994).

Another example of a moral panic sparked by interest groups is the "baby parts" scare that occurred in several Latin America countries. A contemporary legend claims that poor children are being kidnapped and butchered for use of their body parts by wealthy North Americans in transplant surgery. Communists and other leftists in Latin America used the baby parts contemporary legend to attack American capitalism and to benefit their political and ideological goals (Campion-Vincent 1990, 1997). The rumors have resulted in physical attacks on Americans. As recently as 1994, two American women in Guatemala were attacked by mobs, which believed that the women were searching for children to kidnap (Johnson 1994; Lopez 1994).

Another example of a moral panic prompted by interest groups was the "stranger-danger" during the 1980s. Best (1990) showed how contemporary legend stories about crimes against children including, kidnapping, child murder, child pornography, arose from to exaggerated claims made by child-protection organizations. A series of similar moral panics arose in Great Britain at about the same time, that linked concerns about serial sex murders, homosexual pedophile rings, sexual child abuse and satanic ritual abuse. Jenkins (1992) showed how

these moral panics were caused by exaggerated claims about threats to children made by several interest groups including, child protection organizations, Protestant fundamentalists, and feminist groups.

False Accusations and the Social Construction of Imaginary Deviants

How is it possible that a moral panic could be caused by widespread accusations of crime, lacking in evidence that the criminals even exist? The key insight is that accusations of crime are a claims-making activity. False accusations can construct imaginary deviants, when social control authorities systematically legitimize the accusations.

Criminologist Elliott Currie has shown how even when deviant acts are purely imaginary, as is the case of witchcraft, people can always be found and fitted into the stereotype of the deviants. Currie's (1968) study of the European witch-hunts suggests that a particular combination of four circumstances caused false accusations of witchcraft to be affirmed by authorities as evidence of that some people were witches. First, there was widespread belief in and fear of secret, conspiratorial witches who supposedly practiced black magic to harm people. Second, in response, there gradually evolved a new occupation of experts specialized in detecting witches, the witch-finders. Third, the witch-finders used ambiguous tests (spectral evidence) to detect witches, so that people accused were almost automatically found guilty. This confirmed their expertise and enhanced the authority of the witch-finders. Fourth, the ideology of traditional Christian religion concerning Satan's corrupting influence fueled the Inquisition's search for any kind of potential heretic.

False accusations are a necessary part of a moral panic. In order for a moral panic to take hold among a large number of people, it is necessary for some people to be publicly identified with the perceived threat, even if the deviance of which they are accused is purely imaginary. It is necessary for a group that feels threatened to find visible scapegoats. Klemke and Tiedeman (1990) studied a wide variety of false accusations of crimes and false labeling of persons as deviants, in order to determine the kinds of social conditions that increase the prevalence of false accusations. They found that three social conditions tend to be associated with increases in false accusations. One, there exists a widespread belief in a society that a threat exists from new kinds of deviants. Two, there is competition between newer and more traditional agencies and authorities of social control over jurisdictions of authority. The newer authorities attempt to expand and justify their authority. Three, the investigation of the newly perceived deviance relies on diagnostic instruments and tests, which are oversimplified and ambiguous; and therefore, easily make errors in identifying deviants. I want to suggest a fourth social condition that produces false accusations drawn from my research (Victor 1993a). It is one that results in a distinctly moralistic perception of the deviance: symbolic resonance of the perceived threat with a demonology (to be explained shortly).

THE CAUSES OF MORAL PANICS: THE CASE OF RITUAL CHILD ABUSE

The following interpretation of the causes of the moral panic over satanic ritual abuse is offered as a case study illustration of social dynamics of the interest group model of moral panics. It also illustrates how false accusations of deviance during moral panics can construct purely imaginary deviants.

Widespread Belief in a Threat from New Forms of Deviance

Belief in a potential threat from moral deviants must spread widely in a society, before a moral panic can get started. How did belief in a threat from secret satanic cults spread widely in American society? Most past studies of moral panics assume that belief in a new threat from moral deviants is largely a product of mass media sensationalism (McRobbie and Thornton 1995). However, this was not the case in the satanic cult scare. Instead, the mass media basically disseminated the claims of authorities presented as being so-called experts in detecting satanic cult crime.

Crouch and Damphousse (1992) carried out a content analysis of satanic cult scare stories in eight major city newspapers in the U.S. They concluded that the newspapers provided a forum for purported experts who claimed to be able to identify the symptoms of satanic cult crime (local police, clergy, and psychotherapists). However, the newspapers did not deliberately try to inflame rumors about these crimes. In my own research, I came to a similar conclusion about the role of the mass media. The moral panic involving SRA spread widely only after some segments of the mass media popularized the claims of authorities who lent credibility to rumors and accusations about satanic cult crime (Victor 1993a:253-255). Specifically, claims-making from the so-called experts was rare in large city newspapers and largely absent on national television news. In contrast, claims-making by these experts about satanic cult crime was common on national television talk-shows, in small-town newspapers, and in Christian religious books.

Timing is also crucial to the emergence of a moral panic. The moral panic involving SRA began at a time, in the early 1980s, when several similar moral panics involving the motif of violent victimization of children had emerged. There was already widespread belief that child sexual abuse was much more common than had previously been thought (Howitt 1992). In the early 1980s, there was already moral panic over crimes against children, involving claims that thousands of children were being kidnapped, sexually assaulted and murdered (Best 1990). As a result, the general public was more receptive to the authorities that lent credibility to SRA stories, than had the timing been different.

The Expansion of Authority in Social Control

Authority plays a key role in defining forms of deviant behavior. Authority also provides legitimacy for claims about new threats to society. Established institutional authorities do not easily regard new claims about threats to society as being credible. However, when new forms of authority begin to develop and to compete for power over a jurisdiction with previously established authorities, the

newer authorities may be tempted to use a newly perceived threat to expand their power. In such conditions, the newer authorities are likely to over-reach their expertise and attribute credibility to false accusations of victimization by a newly discovered threat. I believe that this is the key factor that led to the legitimization of SRA accusations.

Some sociologists who specialize in the study of deviant behavior believe that the most important contemporary social change affecting authority to define the meanings of deviance is the process of the medicalization of social control (Conrad 1992; Conrad and Schneider 1992). In the twentieth century, the social authority to define and interpret deviant behavior has gradually shifted from religious and political authorities, to medical and mental health authorities. Medical and mental health authorities commonly view deviant behavior through the lens of the medical model, as being a form of sickness rather than as sin or crime. Increasingly, lawmakers, courts and the general public call upon medical and mental health authorities to function as social control authorities. When these authorities offer judgements about psychological health and illness, they make implicit judgements about good and evil. (The concept of sickness as a departure from biological homeostasis is relatively value-free. However, it is difficult to escape moral judgements implicit in any concept of "abnormality", when applied to human behavior.) A good example is how homosexual behavior was first defined by religious authorities as a sin, and then redefined by medical authorities (psychiatrists) as a psychological sickness. More recently, in 1973, homosexual behavior was again redefined by psychiatrists under political pressure, and normalized as an expression of a gender-orientation (Bayer 1987). Medical and mental health authorities still commonly interpret the nature of deviant alcohol and drug use, as being forms of mental illnesses (Johnson and Waltezko 1992; Roman 1988).

One consequence of the medicalization of social control is that medical and mental health authorities have been drawn, however reluctantly, into the arenas of politics, lawmaking, and legal judgements. Other authorities, such as legislators, police, judges, and juries, increasingly rely upon their "expertise". The medicalization of social control is a product of American society's confidence in medical techniques to manage life's problems. It is not the result of any deliberate planning on the part of medical and mental health authorities. The metaphor of deviance as sickness now has such a powerful influence in American popular culture that rapists, serial murderers, child molesters, habitual gamblers, excessive dieters, people who commit suicide, and even members of unconventional religious "cults" are commonly portraryed as "sick" people in mass media entertainment. As a consequence, allegations of psychological abnormality often replace allegations of immorality in everyday discourse.

Pfohl (1977) provides an excellent social constructionist analysis of the political developments leading to the redefinition of violent physical aggression by parents against children from a crime, to a public health concern relabeled "child abuse" (see also Howitt 1992). Indications of severe physical trauma in a child, in cases of a suspected crime were initially redefined as "symptoms" of the battered child "syndrome". Thereafter, medical and mental health experts, rather than police, became the authorities relied upon to define the indicators of criminal

behavior. Parents suspected of "child abuse" were redefined as possibly "sick" personalities and treated as "patients", rather than being treated as suspects of crime, and therefore, fully protected by civil liberties laws. Medical and mental health authorities were inevitably drawn, however reluctantly, into legal judgements of parents suspected of engaging in child abuse. Some of them lobbied government for new laws and more funds to deal with what they claimed was the discovery of the new and widespread public health problem of "child abuse". The mass media sensationalized reports about a newly discovered epidemic of "child abuse", even though there was no scientific evidence that violent physical assaults against children had increased over past decades.

We can understand the social construction the of concept of ritual child abuse as similarly a product of the medicalization of social control. The concept is an extension of sensationalized concern about an epidemic of child abuse, and later sexual child abuse. Initially, some mental health specialists who claimed to have developed new medical techniques capable of detecting illegal sexual contact between adults and children ("sexual child abuse") believed that their clients' accounts of sexual victimization by secret satanic cults might be true. These mental health professionals included some psychotherapists specialized in the treatment of mental disorders characterized by dissociated memory processes. They claimed that these disorders were caused primarily by sexual activity forced upon a child by an adult. (Mulhern 1991, 1994, provides a detailed history of the roles of these mental health professionals in the social construction of SRA.) These mental health professionals also included some child protection social workers specialized in the detection and treatment of sexually victimized children. (Nathan and Snedeker 1995, provide a detailed study of the history of the role of these mental health professionals in the social construction of SRA.)

Psychotherapists specialized in the treatment of dissociative disorders and social workers specialized in the treatment of sexually victimized children were drawn into collaboration with each other. They shared a similar focus of professional interest in sexual child abuse and they also shared a similar social situation. These specialists were both struggling to gain greater recognition and respect within their larger community of professionals. If this important discovery could be confirmed in the courts of law and science, these specialists would obtain well-deserved recognition and respect for their newly developing expertise.

These interest groups attempted to publicize their "discovery" of SRA, by communicating them to other professional specialists, and also to the general public. In doing so, they influenced professional and public opinion about claims concerning satanic cult crimes against children. At first, these specialists organized professional training seminars focusing on the their techniques for detecting ritual child abuse. Their audiences included diverse types of other therapists; but also self-proclaimed victims, and interested non-therapists, such as police, clergy, nurses, and medical doctors (Mulhern 1991; 1994; Victor 1993a). Some of these therapists communicated their "discovery" of SRA, by publishing articles in specialized professional journals and in popular culture books. (Examples can be found in: Cozolino 1989; 1990; Feldman 1993; Fewster 1990; Friesen 1991; Gould and Cozolino 1992; Hill and Goodwin 1989; Hudson 1991; Kelley 1988; 1989;

Mayer 1991; Noblitt and Perskin 1995; Ross 1995; Ryder 1992; Shaffer and Cozolino 1992; Sakheim and Devine 1992; Smith 1993; Smith and Pazder, 1980; Young, Sachs, Braun, and Watkins 1991).

The "discovery" of the ritual sexual abuse of children by secret satanic cults thrust these marginal specialists into the spotlight of mass media attention, even when they did not seek it, because their discovery was so sensational. The mass media quickly responded to the bizarre accounts of SRA and invited these SRA "experts" to discuss their discovery on television talk-shows, on radio programs, and in newspaper and magazine articles (Victor 1993a). The mass media used the dramatic claims of these "experts" to attract audiences.

Some were also asked to be professional advisors to social movement organizations concerned with sexual child abuse. Some of them even helped to lobby state legislatures for new laws to protect children from criminal satanic cults and were successful in obtaining laws in at least four states. The passage of special laws against SRA then functioned to provide political legitimacy to SRA accusations. All of these activities set the stage for a counter-reaction to claims about SRA.

When some interest groups expand their authority and power, they almost inevitably encounter opposing interest groups. The SRA claims of "recovered memory" therapists and child protection social workers aroused the concerns of many behavioral scientists, as well as psychotherapists whose therapy was grounded in behavioral and biomedical treatments. In response, these professionals organized themselves to influence professional and public opinion, framing the issue in a civil liberties context (possibly false accusations and false memories), rather than one focused on the purported symptoms of psychologically abnormal behavior (Beckett 1996).

Faulty Techniques for Investigating Deviant Behavior

Widespread false accusations of deviance are produced, when authorities rely upon faulty techniques for distinguishing between true and false accusations. The key problem in investigations of accusations of sexual child abuse, including SRA accusations, is that reliable, scientific techniques have not yet been developed for distinguishing between true and false accusations of child sexual abuse (Ofshe and Watters 1994; Pendergrast 1995; Wakefield and Underwager 1994; Yapko 1994). Three types of faulty investigative techniques have been used to detect SRA: 1) those employing unreliable indicators, 2) those resulting in false confessions and false accusations; and 3) those resulting in false memories.

Unreliable Indicators

Faulty techniques in the investigation of sexual child abuse include highly ambiguous check-lists of indicators used by child protection counselors to identify supposed "symptoms" of sexual abuse in a child's personality (Nathan and Snedeker 1995). Ambiguous lists of indicators are also used by psychotherapists to identify the supposed long-range effects of sexual abuse in the behavior of their adult patients (Lindsay and Read 1994; Loftus 1993). When authorities rely upon ambiguous indicators of deviance, false accusations become inevitable. When

authorities believe that their indicators are reliable, an accusation by an authority figure easily leads to the presumption of guilt.

False Confessions and False Accusations

It was common for investigators in past moral panics to rely upon manipulative or coercive interrogations to produce false confessions and false accusations. False confessions coerced by torture were common during the European witch-hunts. However, voluntary false confessions of witchcraft also occurred. Frightened women sometimes voluntarily confessed to being witches and to having had intercourse with the Devil, thereby condemning themselves to death (Cohn 1975; Jackson 1995; Sebald 1990). The elaborately detailed SRA accounts from children can also be explained by certain interrogation techniques (Nathan and Snedeker 1995). Interaction research has shown how commonly used conversational patterns during interrogations between child protection workers and children suspected of being sexually abused, can easily prompt a child's false confirmation of abuse, due to the adult's authority and child's fear of coercion. (Lloyd 1992).

False Memories

Survey research has found that those psychotherapists who claim to have had patients with memories of SRA, are also those who are most likely to use "memory recovery" techniques (Bottoms, Shaver, and Goodman 1996). Many cognitive psychologists suggest that the "memory recovery" techniques employed by some therapists to uncover long forgotten "repressed" memories of childhood sexual abuse, are the means by which false memories are elicited (Lindsay and Read 1994; Loftus 1993). (Currently, there is heated scientific debate about whether or not unconscious, "repressed" memories actually exist.) The label "memory recovery" technique encompasses a very wide variety of questionable techniques. These include: hypnosis, guided imagery and visualization exercises, stream-of-consciousness daily journal writing, interpreting dreams as messages from the unconscious, interpreting physical symptoms as "body memories", and interpreting unconscious memories in a patient's drawings.

Memory recovery techniques easily create false memories resulting from therapist suggestion effects (Lindsay and Read 1994). In the interaction between therapist and patient, patients respond to direct or subtle suggestions from their therapists, by offering accounts of SRA that they think will please their therapists. In their search for explanations for their ambiguous anxieties, patients gradually come to believe that their accounts of SRA are their own, genuine memories of past events. The crucial factor is the effect of the therapist's authority in influencing a suggestible patient's perceptions about ambiguous anxieties.

Symbolic Resonance with a Demonology

What is the mechanism whereby shared moral beliefs lead to the consensual validation of particular claims and accusations of deviance? The concept of a master frame and framing processes has been employed by sociologists to study how the ideologies of social movements are linked to the cognitive schema of individual participants (Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994; Snow and Benford 1992; Snow,

Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). A master frame functions to organize selective attention to particular problems, to attribute meaning to them, to articulate relevant events and experiences, to explain the underlying causes and to propose solutions. A demonology cognitively functions like a master frame for interpreting possible threats to people's shared moral values. Claims about a threat from moral deviants are viewed through the perceptual lens of culturally shared demonologies, especially when there is great ambiguity and little manifest evidence to verify the claims.

Some anthropologists use the term "demonology" to refer to the core of a moral belief system, that cognitively organizes that system of moral thought. A demonology is an explanation of the ultimate power that threatens to destroy the moral order of a society. Stevens (1991:21) defines a demonology as "an ideology of evil, a elaborate body of belief about an evil force that is inexorably undermining society's most cherished values and institutions". I use the term "symbolic resonance with a demonology", to indicate that certain purported threats may be symbolically consistent, or resonant, with a demonology and are more likely to be attributed credibility, whereas others are ignored and disregarded because they are inconsistent. The cultural symbols of specific claims about moral threats may be consistent (or resonant) with the demonologies held by specific interest groups. This consistency contributes to their consensual validation of the reality of those claims within groups[3].

In other words, people who share a moral belief system are likely to selectively define certain purported moral threats, and not others, as ones to be taken seriously by society. For example, in my research on the dissemination of satanic cult crime stories, I found that fearful satanic cult rumors spread more rapidly through particular social networks in which people shared moral beliefs. Curiously, specific social and communication networks, and not others, functioned as selective conduits for the contemporary legend stories, transmitting claims about threats and giving the claims consensual validation (Victor 1993a). My research found that claims and accusations about SRA are symbolically resonant with three different demonologies. These are 1) Christian traditionalist, 2) social conservative and 3) feminist.

The Traditional Christian Demonology

People who accept the Christian traditionalist demonology regard the ultimate cause of evil, as being due to the activities or workings of Satan. In this frame, Satan-worshippers are seen as being actual agents of Satan, who are trying to spread immorality of all kinds, in order to destroy the moral order of American society and hasten Satan's take over of the world. The logic is that if good people are working for God, than evil people must be working for Satan. Thus, satanic cult crime and SRA in particular are simply more examples of the growing moral corruption in American society by "evil" people, who reject God and true Christianity (Jenkins 1992; Jenkins and Maier-Katkin 1992; Lippert 1990; Victor 1994). An increasing number of psychotherapists identify themselves as being "Christian therapists". (Goleman 1991).

The Social Conservative Demonology

People who hold the social conservative demonology regard "liberal permissiveness" as the underlying cause of most social evils. In this frame, "ritualistic crime" is seen as being a product of the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure and power and the increasing climate of moral permissiveness. SRA is viewed as being one more manifestation of the moral decline and corruption of American society, which has its source in the moral anarchy of the 1960s. The social conservative demonology is most likely to be found among local police who are self-proclaimed experts in investigating satanic cult crime (Hicks 1991).

The Feminist Demonology

There are different feminist ideologies. Some emphasize socio-economic inequality as being the essential destructive force in society. However, other feminist ideologies hold a demonology that regards male dominance in society (patriarchy) and its exploitation of women and children as the essential underlying threat to the moral order of society. Feminist psychotherapists and social workers, who hold the latter demonology, are those most likely to attribute credibility to accusations of SRA (Nathan 1991; Nathan and Snedeker 1995; Victor 1993a). They frame SRA accusations in terms of an analogy with the victimization of women by male sexual aggression, as in cases of rape, incest and sexual harassment. They see ritual child abuse as one more example of the hidden sexual exploitation of women and children They regard skepticism about accusations of SRA, as one more attempt by men to discredit women and children's testimony about their sexual victimization by men. Yet, they ignore the fact that many of the people who have been accused of SRA are mothers and female childcare workers.

PART III CROSS-NATIONAL CULTURAL DIFFUSION OF MORAL PANICS

Accusations, claims and rumors about satanic cult crime have surfaced in many countries other than the United States since the mid-1980s. These countries include: Canada (Lippert 1990), the United Kingdom (Jenkins 1992; La Fontaine 1994), Australia (Guilliantt 1996; Richardson 1997), New Zealand (Hill and Barnett 1994), the Netherlands (Netherlands Ministry of Justice 1994), Norway (Dyrendal 1998), and Sweden. Some psychotherapists suggest that the vivid accounts of SRA, given by children and adult psychotherapy patients in so many different nations, are evidence that secret, criminal satanic cults exist around the world. They assume that it is impossible for accounts of victimization that are so similar, to surface about the same time, in so many distant countries. However, sociologists and anthropologists who are familiar with past examples of cultural diffusion are likely to be quite skeptical of such an assumption.

One informative example took place in the twelfth century and involved accusations remarkably similar to those of ritual child abuse. Accusations of ritual child murder made against the Jews originated in twelfth century England, then traveled quickly across the English Channel to northern France, and from there to

Germany, Spain and the rest of Christian Europe (Langmuir 1990). These false accusations spread across many different societies, long before the existence of modern mass media. The accusations are known as "the blood libel".

A study of cross-national cultural diffusion between social movements by McAdam and Rucht (1993) offers useful theoretical principles for understanding the cultural diffusion of collective behavior. McAdam and Rucht's study is particularly important, because moral panics are spread by social movements, at least in part. In the case of SRA accusations, Christian fundamentalist and feminist social movements played a central role. McAdam and Rucht emphasize that the transmission of new ideas from one society to another is more likely, the more similar the culture, social organization and social roles in the recipient society. Particularly important for the transmission of new ideas between social movements are similarities in language, ideologies and the occupations of activists. Secondly, McAdam and Rucht suggest that there must exist social networks of contact and channels of communication between people playing similar institutional roles in the sending and recipient societies. More specifically, there must first be to be direct, interpersonal contacts. These direct contacts activate selective attention to indirect channels of communication, such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, books, and professional journals.

There are significant differences between the cross-national diffusion of new ideas used by social movements and the diffusion of the causes of moral panics. The main content transmitted between social movements involves movement tactics and the elaboration of ideological theory. In contrast, the main content transmitted in moral panics involves: 1) contemporary legend stories, claims, and accusations about a newly perceived threat from deviants, and 2) new techniques for detecting deviants. Unfortunately, there is space in this article only to outline my findings about the transmission of these contents about satanic cult crime from the United States to other countries. My sources included newspaper and magazine articles, as well as personal communications with scholars in other countries (Victor 1993a).

Similarities between Transmitter and Adopters

One obvious similarity between the various societies in which satanic cult crime stories have appeared is that of language. All are societies in which English is either the primary language, or a common second language. The shared language facilitates rapid communication, both through direct interpersonal contacts and through indirect channels of communication.

A second similarity is the existence of sizable population subgroups that share ideologies containing the same demonologies. More specifically, all the societies where SRA accusations have surfaced contain relatively influential groups of fundamentalist Protestant Christians, as well as feminists.

Another key similarity is the existence of similar occupations. In these societies, medical and mental health professionals (especially psychotherapists and child protection workers), fundamentalist clergymen, local police, and journalists have publicized claims about satanic cult crime. Many of the claims-makers in these occupations hold either a Christian traditionalist or feminist demonology. These

professionals are able to make personal contact with their American counterparts at international conferences in the United States or in their home countries. Thereafter, they establish more personal social networks and channels of communication.

A contrast with a culture where claims about satanic cult crime have not taken root is useful. In France, SRA accusations being made in American society and nearby England are regarded with ridicule, if they are known at all. Journalists and popular writers are often quite critical of the foibles of American culture and often resistant to what they consider to be cultural fads coming from America. In France, only 17% of the population believe in the existence of the Devil compared with 65% in the U.S., according to opinion polls (Gallup 1982:98). Fundamentalist Protestantism has no political significance. French feminism, which centers its demonology upon a critique of the capitalist elite and socioeconomic injustice, is ideologically quite different from Anglo-American feminism. It is likely that cross-national, personal contacts between people in the same occupations, such as medical doctors, psychotherapists and police, are relatively uncommon, due in part to language and cultural differences.

Channels of Communication

Americans communicated claims about satanic cult crime to foreign nationals through direct interpersonal contacts at professional conferences for therapists, social workers, police, clergy, and journalists. These conferences were located in the United States, or in the home countries, where American "experts" were often invited to share their new ideas. Some of these conferences offered training sessions in how to identify satanic cult crime, or symptoms of SRA (Mulhern 1994). (The spread of new ideas via this means is familiar to many scholars.) It is through direct contacts such as these, that claims about secret satanic cults spread very quickly from the U.S., to Canada and the United Kingdom The indirect, non-relational channels which transmitted satanic cult crime stories from the U.S. included elements of the mass media. Christian books about satanic cult crime were quickly reprinted for Protestant fundamentalists in other countries, or sold in English-language versions. American television talk shows presenting testimonials by SRA survivors were broadcast in some English speaking countries. They quickly produced their own homegrown products with similar content. American pop culture magazines circulate in English-speaking countries. Foreign newspapers and magazines reported stories about SRA, often citing American "experts" in the study of SRA. The existence of these mass media presentations means that some patients in psychotherapy and some children were familiar with SRA allegations, shortly after they first surfaced in the United States.

More important than indirect mass media channels of communication were professional channels. Foreign medical doctors and psychotherapists commonly subscribe to specialized American professional journals, as a source of new ideas. The journal of the International Society for the Study of Multiple Personality and Dissociation *(Dissociation)* offered several early articles identifying SRA as a real and serious concern (Hill and Goodwin 1989). In addition, American-made lists of symptoms of SRA and mimeographed conference papers about SRA written by

American "experts" circulated widely in Europe (Kaye and Klein 1987). These were then cited as authoritative sources about SRA, in the professional papers of English-speaking, European mental health specialists. As a result, Europeans were quick to apply the very same faulty investigative techniques that contributed to causing the American moral panic over SRA.

In conclusion, the cross-national diffusion of claims, accusations and rumors about deviance which cause moral panics, occurs through similar social processes as those which account for their diffusion within a heterogeneous, industrial society. Claims about a threat from newly perceived deviance travel faster through specific social networks and communication channels, where they are attributed credibility by authorities and by a shared demonology. The key phenonmena is differential social and communication networks.

SUMMARY

This article developed a theory of moral panics and illustrated the theory with research about the moral panic over ritual child abuse by satanic cults. The theory is designed to explain forms of collective behavior previously labeled witch-hunts, persecutions, panics, scares, and purges. It is drawn from symbolic interactionist theory and a social constructionist perspective on deviance perspective.

A moral panic can be defined as a societal response to beliefs about a threat from newly perceived moral deviants. A moral panic has five distinguishing characteristics. First, the societal reaction shows volatility in the form of a sudden eruption and subsiding of concern about the threat. Second, the concern about the threat is widespread in a society. Third, the purported deviants are regarded as a threat to the basic moral values of the society. Fourth, there is consensus in significant segments of the population that the threat is real. Fifth, concern about the threat is disproportional to empirical measures of harm from the purported deviants.The possible causes of moral panics can be analyzed by employing three models of moral panics: 1) a grass roots model, 2) an elite-engineered model, and 3) an interest group model

The moral panic over satanic ritual abuse is best understood through use of the interest group model. The underlying causes of a moral panic promoted by interest groups include the following four social conditions. First, there is a widespread belief in the existence of a threat from new forms of deviance, spread by contemporary legend rumors and the mass media. Social control authorities then legitimize the belief. Second, a new form of authority is expanding its jurisdiction over the social control of deviance. Third, the new authorities employ faulty techniques for investigating deviance that cannot adequately distinguish between true and false accusations of deviance. Fourth, there exists a symbolic consistency (resonance) between the purported threat and a widely held demonology, which functions as a cognitive frame about the ultimate nature of "evil". These four social conditions operate simultaneously to socially construct definitions of deviance. The definitions of deviance constructed by a moral panic take the form of stereotypes of actual deviants, or even imaginary deviants (as is the case of satanic cult criminals). The key social processes influencing belief in a threat from

moral deviants within interest groups are: 1) legitimization of belief by authority and 2) the consensual validation of reality.

The cross-national diffusion of the causes of moral panics involves: 1) the communication of claims, rumors and accusations about the newly perceived threat from moral deviants and 2) the communication of faulty techniques for detecting the deviants. Cross-national communication requires certain similarities between transmitters in one society and adopters in the receiving society; particularly in language, culturally inherited demonology, and occupational roles. The cross-national diffusion of the conditions that cause moral panics also requires specific channels of communication. Initially, there must be direct interpersonal contacts. That encourages selective attention to indirect channels of communication, via the mass media and special interest publications. Requirements for the cross-national diffusion of a moral panic are essentially similar to those that account for the internal diffusion within a society of claims, rumors and accusations of deviance: differential social and communication networks.

NOTES

1. Moral panics are a product of socio-political processes and not psychological characteristics of individuals, such as suggestibility, a disposition to fantasize, delusions, or personal anxieties. The implications of this concept sharply differ from psychiatric concepts, such as "mass hysteria" or "emotional contagion". Psychiatric concepts focus upon emotionality (labeled as "irrational"). In contrast, the concept of moral panic focuses upon cognition and communication behavior. A sociological analysis of the mass adoption of the sick role in outbreaks of unusual collective behavior, often labeled "mass psychogenic illness", can be found in Bartholomew (1994) and Gehlen (1977). Also, see Bartholomew (1990) and Stallings (1994) for recent critiques of the mass hysteria and emotional contagion concepts.
2. Criticism of social constructionism has emphasized that this perspective ignores the "objective" realities of deviant behavior, such as the empirically verifiable physical, psychological and interpersonal harms that may result from certain behaviors (Miller and Holstein 1993). The criticism suggests that the social constructionist perspective regards claims-making about deviance, as if it comes into existence entirely unrelated to any objective empirical measures of harm done by deviant behavior in a society. In response, social constructionists argue that a "contextual" form of social constructionist research does relate the claims defining deviance to empirical measures of those claims (Best 1993). My analysis of SRA accusations follows the contextual form of social constructionist
3. I don't wish to deny that many people's critical thinking ability can lead them to be personally skeptical about claims that are consistent with their moral beliefs. However, it is quite another matter for individuals to challenge the conformity pressures that enforce consensual beliefs within their own social networks.

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