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**Deliberate disinformation in the Orkney ritual child abuse case**

**Sarah Nelson OBE**

**CRFR, University of Edinburgh**

Sarah.Nelson@ed.ac.uk

In this presentation I hope to illustrate, through the example of the Orkney child abuse case which had its thirtieth anniversary this year, types of disinformation that were deliberately employed to dismiss and ridicule the existence of satanist ritual abuse (SRA). Because this was such a prominent child abuse case in the UK, it set the tone for reaction to any future cases with ritual elements. Secondly, to ask if you recognise some similar common threads in cases you are aware of, or in which you have been involved. We may I hope in future be able to put these together, both for academic papers and for other forms of public sharing to inform the wider community, raising awareness and critical thinking about such disinformation.

I will give first a brief history of the Orkney case and Inquiry, not assuming people are necessarily familiar with it. The Orkney islands are a small group of islands off the far north-east coast of Scotland, capital Kirkwall.

**Brief history of the Orkney case and inquiry**

In November 1990 a teenage girl, one of 15 children in the very disadvantaged W family in South Ronaldsay, Orkney, alleged sexual contact by her older brothers and a church minister. Seven of her younger brothers and sisters were removed from home into state care by social workers under place of safety orders.

Until February 1991, a public campaign by some Orkney people to return the W children included the clergyman and his wife, a doctor, and several parents whose own children were later removed. Social workers were puzzled by the huge volume of correspondence being sent to the young W children, and by the many baffling messages, objects (such as a hammer) and symbols it contained.

In February 1991, during interviews by Royal Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (RSSPCC) and police officers, three young W children separately made allegations of organised sexual abuse and strange outdoor rituals in a quarry and on a beach in South Ronaldsay. They claimed many adults and children were involved, including the clergyman and four families. They described strange costumes, musical equipment, portable lights, trailers, a ‘hooker’ (a type of shepherd’s crook) and being pulled from a circle of people into the abusive clergyman at the centre.

On 27 February at 7 am, police and social workers removed nine children into care from the four named families under place of safety orders. All four families were English ‘incomers’; three were professional middle class. Grounds for referral mentioned group sexual activity including “ritualistic music, dancing and dress”. The parents and church minister were questioned by police.

A major campaign with huge publicity was immediately launched against these children’s removal. Media involvement was almost entirely in support of the parents, who very articulately protested their innocence and made skilful links with journalists. In particular, journalists from the “quality” press and media often came from the same social background and found it visibly hard to believe people like them could do such things, a reason I think why coverage was usually as incredulous as that of the tabloids. The churches or religions the four families claimed to belong to also supported the children’s return, and did not seem to consider the children might be at risk.

These nine children, aged from 8 to 15, were interviewed repeatedly by RSSPCC staff and police. Words and behaviour by five of the children at interview – and especially, with foster parents- appeared to confirm aspects of the W children’s allegations. These included a seven year old graphically enacting childbirth and saying the baby would die; an 8 year old who said her father kept blood in the fridge; an 11 year old drawing fantastic and frightening images, and acting out plays involving bloodshed, sex, religion and violence; and an 8 year old saying his mother could hear him through the radio, and chanting to his foster parents when a power cut affected the lights: “May the light not be upon us and God not be with us”.

In April 1991 a proof hearing was heard by Sheriff David Kelbie. (Sheriffs in Scotland are a type of judge). He held that the proceedings had been incompetent, dismissed the case calling it “fatally flawed”, and the evidence was not heard – nor ever has been – in any civil or criminal court. The parents and minister have neither been found innocent, nor found guilty. The children were immediately returned home amid huge publicity. The Orkney Inquiry report (see below) noted that a social work manager who accompanied the children home said the behaviour of several on the ‘plane changed greatly, their language became sexualised and they made sexual propositions to staff.

In June 1991, after the Crown Office (responsible for prosecution of crime in Scotland) announced there would be no criminal proceedings, the government launched a public inquiry under Lord Clyde. Its remit was to inquire into the authorities’ actions, and to make recommendations. Its remit did not include looking at whether the children had been abused or not.

While the report said everyone had acted in good faith, it was strongly critical of the authorities’ actions. It made more than 190 recommendations for future good practice. These included conduct of investigations, removal of children, rights of children when detained, proper treatment of foster carers, training needs, conduct of medical examinations, and interviewing of children (Clyde, 1992, pp. 353–63). Many recommendations influenced the subsequent Children (Scotland) Act of 1995. The Act saw changes in child protection orders, a tightening of conditions surrounding such orders, and provision for removing suspected abusers from home. Basically it became harder to protect children who were at genuine risk.

Scotland’s prosecution service announced that there would be no criminal charges and in March 1996 the four families accepted financial compensation, with an apology from Orkney Islands Council.

**SATANIC PANIC THEORY AND ORKNEY**

However, descriptions of the Orkney case you will discover (apart from the one in my own book!!) feature little of the above facts or mundane detail. Instead, it is held up internationally as a notorious “child abuse scandal” and a ridiculous case of “satanic panic”.

Thus one Scottish journalist in 2001: “South Ronaldsay (Orkney) is where the ritual sexual abuse theory leapt from the pages of social work journals and entered the popular lexicon of the nation”.

Such versions have been recycled in Wikipedia, in documentaries, books, ‘faction’ dramas and newspaper features. The allegations, it is claimed, were completely baseless, the social workers were gullible or worse, the innocent parents completely wronged, and the “dawn raids” heartlessly cruel. The case was held up as a warning against believing such nonsense about satanic anything in any subsequent case where ritual abuse was claimed or suspected. Indeed this example, and another Scottish case in Ayrshire (not discussed here) seemed to frighten the Scottish authorities so much that to my knowledge no case where ritual abuse was prosecuted or mentioned has been brought to court since.

**MEDIA MANIPULATION**

When I visited Orkney to cover the case and Inquiry for A Scottish newspaper and a social work journal at that time, (I later returned to academia) I was fairly experienced as a journalist. Yet I encountered a powerful scent of organised media manipulation which I had not met before.

The first and leading example was ‘**satanic panic’** theory, repeated uncritically in print (even in ‘quality’ media) when pushed by these vocal parents and their supporters. This rose to prominence in both the USA and UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially and perhaps mainly when middle class ‘respectable’ parents or carers were accused or suspected. It’s still widely circulated today where there is any suspicion of ritual or occult activity in an alleged child abuse case.

This theory said there were stories of a widespread, highly organised cult of devil-worshippers who engaged in blood sacrifice and ritualistic child sexual abuse. These stories were said to be propagated by a surprisingly wide assortment, and a more surprising collaboration, of people including evangelical pastors, police, psychotherapists, radical feminists and social workers. (Despite neither radical feminists nor social workers being known for their staunch fundamentalist Christian convictions, nor for their belief in the devil!)

It was claimed that the panic then swept across the Atlantic to Europe, with the beliefs of child protection and mental health staff fuelled or even instigated by, it is often said, Schreiber’s *Sybil* (2009), Smith and Pazder’s *Michelle Remembers* (1989), and Bass and Davis’ *The Courage to Heal (*1988). Supposed links with these particular books were once again repeated in a BBC Radio 4 documentary by David Aaronovitch in 2015, so these stories still continue. It was claimed that child protection staff were instantly converted to the idea of ‘satanic abuse’ and zealous to prove it, even after attending a single conference on the subject. Child protection officials have been said to use dubious, vague, nearly always unspecified techniques to extract bizarre disclosures from children and adults.

Promoters of ‘satanic panic’ theory drew parallels with historic witch hunts in mediaeval times, with the Salem witch trials or even with McCarthyism, leading internationally to respected, respectable, loving families being accused of ‘satanic’ child abuse; and to ‘witch hunts’ against respectable parents. This tale was quickly wheeled out in Orkney to explain the removal of the children.

***\*\*(Neil is going to stop this recording for five minutes or so, to ask for feedback on whether you recognise from other cases this theory of satanic panic and if the arguments I outline above have been used elsewhere)\*\****

**MYSTERIOUS NEWSLETTERS!**

During the child abuse inquiry of 1991–92, a series of pagan and occult bookshop newsletters, published in England, with titles like *The Lamp of Thoth*, circulated widely on the islands and were sent to elected councillors. I found these newsletters strewn about in the council and inquiry. “At last the full truth about the satanic abuse allegations can be revealed!” they dramatically claimed. They also alleged that minority religions such as paganism were being persecuted- another common theme. Whole sections of their propaganda about worldwide conspiracies by social workers and/or evangelical Christians or both were repeated as fact, even in some ‘quality’ papers, despite clearly coming from such a partial source.

**FOLK DEVILS OF BACKLASH PROPONENTS**

These stories have kept reappearing in the media and on the internet, sometimes with a ‘folk devil’ of the backlash, Dr Roland Summit thrown in. For instance, a normally discriminating journalist Torquil Crichton, was persuaded to write this:

. ...” A psychiatrist Roland Summit’s controversial idea was that organised, ritualistic abuse of children was happening everywhere. ... it was out there and all social workers had to do was go and find it. And they did so with a passion of a zealot rooting out evil. The idea crossed the Atlantic gaining professional credibility as it spread like wildfire.” (Crichton, 2001)

… On demonic wings, presumably!

I was told myself on Orkney by one of the suspected parents that Roland Summit had influenced this intervention on the Scottish islands because he wrote that if children denied abuse , it meant they had indeed suffered it. This was a distortion of Summit’s well known paper The Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome. He has publicly refuted this allegation, which has kept appearing in other cases, as nonsense.

It is interesting that both Summit and Bass and Davies (The Courage to Heal) have been so targeted and so consistently, especially as neither is particularly known for talking about satanist abuse in any case!

Dr. Summit , the eminent psychiatrist working in California, has been an angry, fearless and outspoken pioneer in the protection of children from sexual abuse, both highly respected and shunned for speaking out consistently for child and adult survivors when very few were willing to put their professional reputations out on the line.  (He also incidentally said "*statistics show that most adults who abuse children sexually are neither mentally nor emotionally ill".*) Maybe that’s what has so angered and frustrated abusers and their allies for decades? He has been an inspiration to me and I suspect to many of you also.

As for Bass and Davies’ *The Courage to Heal* , in its many-more than 20- editions, it has proved one of the most helpful and inspiring, widely read and often life- changing books for adult survivors, particularly female survivors; and I think that is the source of the threat they seem to pose to abusers and their allies, who consistently over the decades have tried to smear them.

***\*\*(Neil is going to stop the recording again for any feedback on the use of Summit, Bass and Davis, other outspoken feminists (such as Judith Herman) or any other writers/practitioners who have been targeted in your experience. This is of particular interest and I think we can collect them!)***

**SATANIC PANIC -MANY UNTRUTHS**

In my book, chs. 2 and 3 *(Tackling Child Sexual Abuse: Radical approaches to prevention, protection and support, Policy Press/University of Chicago Press 2016*) I have attempted comprehensively to challenge the string of untruths in satanic panic theory. I don’t want to labour that now and time doesn’t permit, but it includes-

* We’re expected simultaneously to believe that ‘satanic abuse’ disclosures and allegations are unbelievable, incredible, ludicrous and completely without evidence – and would be to any normal person – yet that educated professionals in child protection and mental health swallowed them whole after reading one book, or attending one conference!
* The verbal disclosures, actions and behaviours of children and adults abused in ritual settings were so baffling, so esoteric and so unlike content previously heard that it would be incredibly difficult – I suggest impossible – to generate these words, actions and behaviour through pressured interviewing techniques by professionals such as social workers. (Even had these illegitimate techniques been specified and proved to have occurred in each case.) It was in fact the foster parents of children taken into care in both the English case in Nottingham and in Orkney, not professionals during interviews, who produced by far the most evidence of children’s bizarre statements, drawings and actions. These were ordinary people who were baffled and disturbed by what they witnessed and heard from the children placed in their care. No convincing explanation of this point by ‘satanic panic’ theorists has ever been made.
* Most of all, the idea that any professionals rushed out zealously to find satanic abuse was the very opposite of the truth. No one in their right minds could wish to believe that anyone could inflict such disgusting, horrifying, unspeakably cruel tortures on children. It overturned many people’s whole world view and their faith in humanity. Practitioners also often feared for their own safety.

**COMMON SENSE WAS LOST**

Critical faculties and the normal discriminatory sense seemed to be lost during the Orkney case and Inquiry. For instance, claims were spread that one ‘born-again’ Christian basic grade social worker, CF influenced the Orkney social work department and police into jointly carrying out the dawn raids on the families. This influence by a basic grade worker was implied too in BBC Scotland TV’s ‘faction’ drama *Flowers of the Forest* (BBC Drama, 1996). Among other, often ludicrous, aspects of this drama (listed in Nelson, 1996), which had a social worker ripping up a teddy bear in anger, the fact was ignored that even had the social worker CF sought this far-reaching and long-planned act, he lacked any professional power or status to succeed!

**PREVIOUS CASES INFLUENCED ORKNEY INTERPRETATION**

Interpretation of the Orkney case was also filtered through a template of child sexual abuse cases during the previous few years. One example occurred in the English midlands city of Nottingham.

The extent to which untruths or - to put no finer point on it - lies have influenced these cases is shown by the Nottingham case, which set Orkney in context in many minds. The Nottingham case also powerfully demonstrates how ‘backlash’ accounts of an organised abuse case with ritual features can still dominate popular discourse, DESPITE in Nottingham a string of court convictions and the official clearing of social workers’ actions. Even this seemed to have little effect.

I think one thing this confirms is that most of the public, media and even professionals find this form of abuse not just very difficult to believe- especially in a society like GB which is more secular than the USA- but also too horrifying and unacceptable to believe.

In Nottingham, nine adults from a deprived estate were convicted in February 1989, found guilty of 53 charges of incest, cruelty and indecent assault after their children and 18 others were taken into care. There were claims that wealthy and respected professional people were also abusing these disadvantaged children. The case raised great controversy (which continues) over whether ritual abuse also happened, because some children made bizarre, very disturbing revelations to their foster carers. These included the existence of tunnels under the city where some children said they had been taken.

The police, however, were sceptical of any cult links and critical of social services who believed the children’s accounts. The local authority set up the Joint Enquiry Team (JET) to try and resolve these professional conflicts, but it only exacerbated them. The JET team, in dismissing ritual abuse, proposed that social workers had brainwashed children in interviews, had been influenced by a specialist with sex offenders, that they and/or the children’s foster parents were evangelical Christians, that the children might have seen horror videos or read books featuring witches, and that the NSPCC persuaded children they were satanically abused (Anning et al, 1997).

But the trouble with this line was that the social workers never formally interviewed the children, who disclosed instead to their foster parents, ordinary people who wrote down the children’s bizarre conversations and who, like the foster parents of the Orkney children, did not understand what these accounts meant or where they had come from.

The JET team did not interview the social workers yet still proposed that they had induced children to tell these stories. The social workers and foster parents had only consulted the specialist for advice months after the children had described peculiar occult practices. That was also incidentally true in the Orkney case.

The child protection professionals were commended by the High Court and the chief executive of Nottinghamshire Council. Their work was scrutinised by the Department of Health Social Services Inspectorate; the ‘brainwashing’ thesis was rejected by Nottinghamshire County Council and by the High Court.

The county social services committee repudiated this JET report (Nottinghamshire County Council, 1990). However, despite all this the JET report was widely leaked and publicised. Ever since, it has been the most heavily promoted and widely available account for the public. Its claims feature prominently in media articles and on internet accounts of the Nottingham case, as an example of the ‘satanic panic’. This example gives some idea of the resistance we have all had and still have to face, against scrutinising calmly and thoroughly both the evidence and the disinformation in highly publicised cases.

**AN ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE?**

A different response could have been made to a highly publicised and controversial case such as Orkney. There could have been a limited-term inquisitorial judicial inquiry into the failings in official conduct, with recommendations for improvement in future. There could have been a funded research programme into forms of organised sexual abuse of children. There could have been exploration and establishment of the most effective protective measures and support for children in remote and rural areas and islands, including helplines, children’s rights centres and officers and exploration of lawful and effective techniques of surveillance and evidence-gathering in such areas.

Alternative strategies, however, demand a willingness to pause and reflect before responding to public and media scandal and outrage. They call for political courage, the ability to consider and suspect disinformation, and determination to place the needs of children above the raucous demands and wounded sensibilities of, in particular, educated and respectable adults. It is only through considering how hard the alternative approach is to imagine that we can appreciate how skewed our child protection system can be, perhaps most especially when there is suspicion of sadistic and organised cruelties which can prove too unbearable to believe.

**And finally, we also very much have to question the whole point of expensive inquiries which do not actually explore whether the children at the centre of a case were abused or not.**

***(This ends my presentation, but Neil may have some questions for me, and he will ask you to put any questions that you have for me. I can send him replies as far as I am able, for him to forward to you. You can also read a comprehensive account of the Orkney case, in the context of cases which preceded and followed it, in my book Tackling Child Sexual Abuse: Radical Approaches (2016) published by Policy Press in the UK, and Univ of Chicago Press in USA.)***