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# Dissecting Disbelief: Possible Reasons for the Denial of the Existence of Ritual Abuse in the United Kingdom

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### Abstract

When allegations of ritual abuse first came to light in the UK, they were met primarily with a 'discourse of disbelief' that left little room for the possibility accounts could be based in genuine experience. Despite convictions, recent criminological, sociological and psychological literature appears fixed on debunking ritual abuse's existence through highly debated concepts such as 'false memory'. This paper proposes three broad 'reasons' for the creation and maintenance of disbelief around ritual abuse, highlighting the importance of key cases in shaping press coverage of the issue during the 1980s and 1990s, and the role survivor advocates have played in distancing ritual abuse from established knowledge within both psychology and child protection. I argue that the tangibility of death and abject horror within survivor accounts, as well as the perceived religious motivations of perpetrators, make ritual abuse both experientially and conceptually alien to most members of late-modern societies.

### Keywords

Ritual abuse; organised abuse; child protection; Cleveland; McMartin.

### Introduction

One of the more common experiences that unites survivors of child abuse is that of having one's abusive history denied, disbelieved or minimised; indeed, feminist research has long documented the public silencing of women and children's disclosures of abuse and exploitation (Hlavka 2014). For survivors of ritual abuse, whose abusive experiences are routinely classified as 'false memories' and for whom validating and informed professional support is sparse, this silence has been particularly deafening.

Since its 'discovery' in 1980s America, ritual abuse – loosely defined a form of organised abuse that occurs in a ritual or ceremonial context – has remained a highly contentious topic (Salter 2013). When cases first came to light in the UK over two decades ago, they were met primarily with a 'discourse of disbelief' that left little room for the possibility that accounts could be based in genuine experience (Scott 2001). Within press coverage, corroborative evidence – and, indeed, convictions of accused parents – was overshadowed by pieces that focused on

contesting the truth of allegations (Campbell and Jones 1999). Although a small but resilient community of advocates, child protection professionals and health workers endeavoured to provide care for survivors, they did so against a backdrop of extreme criticism and professional isolation (Sinason 2011). By the mid-1990s, considerable academic and popular comment, including the Department of Health's own investigation into ritual abuse, framed the emergence of cases as a 'moral panic', driven by the influence of evangelical Christians and the malpractice of social workers and psychotherapists (La Fontaine 1994; Loftus and Ketchum 1994; Victor 1993).

Over twenty years later, recently established Operations Yewtree and Fearnbridge – two widespread investigations into 'paedophile networks' operating within the upper echelons of British society – have brought the issue of organised abuse back onto the public and political agenda. However, despite significant expansions in theory and practice around child abuse and exploitation, attitudes towards ritual abuse remain unchanged. The definition of ritual abuse, which was retracted from child protection guidelines back in 1998 (Scott 2001), has not re-entered in any recognisable format (Simon et al. 2012). Whilst there have been several successful convictions of adults for perpetrating ritual abuse in the United Kingdom in recent years, police training on the subject has been criticised by those who state ritual abuse does not exist (Sinason et al. 2008). And recent criminological, sociological and psychological literature appears fixed on debunking its existence through the highly-debated concepts of 'false memory' and 'moral panic' (Salter 2013). The discourse of disbelief, it seems, has not evaporated, despite survivors continuing to present themselves across a variety of different professional environments (Salter 2013).

It is the creation and maintenance of this discourse that this paper attempts to dissect. I focus on three broad 'reasons' behind the disproportionate invalidation of ritual abuse accounts, first highlighting the importance of *when* ritual abuse cases initially emerged, and then emphasising the role that survivor advocates have played in distancing ritual abuse from established and accepted knowledge within both psychology and child protection. Finally I argue that accounts of ritual abuse – which often feature religiously-motivated perpetrators committing extremely violent and sadistic abuse against children – are refuted because they seem particularly alien, when placed in the context of late-modern British experience and identity.

### **Ritual abuse: Characteristics and prevalence**

Ritual abuse generally manifests as a form of organised abuse, meaning it involves more than one perpetrator, and more than one child (Salter 2013). The term typically describes 'abuse associated with repeat activities ("ritual"), which purport to relate the abuse to contexts of a religious, magical or supernatural kind' (Salter 2008).

This basic definition, however, falls short in communicating the trauma embedded in survivors' histories, which feature physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse on a regular – often daily – basis (Scott 2001). In the context of formal rituals and ceremonies, survivors experience extensive physical and sexual abuse by multiple perpetrators, may witness and take part in the mutilation of, and sometimes 'sacrifice' of, animals or humans, and may be forced to ingest drugs or human waste (Rutz et al. 2008). Research with survivors indicates that a wide variety of ideological frameworks may be used to justify such abuse, from inverted forms of Christianity to Judaism and Paganism (Rutz et al. 2008).

Despite the 'extremeness' of ritual abuse, evidence suggests that it directly overlaps with other forms of child abuse and exploitation. Perpetrators do not appear to isolate their activities to those of supposed religious or ideological significance; survivors report being used in the production of child abuse images, being sexually exploited and sometimes trafficked, and

experiencing non-ritual abuse and neglect (Salter 2013; Sarson and McDonald 2008; Scott 2001).

Furthermore, whilst the various doctrines utilised by perpetrators may place women and girls in a superficial position of authority, survivors describe gendered dynamics of power and control operating within families and groups that seem extremely similar – if not identical – to those observed in cases of non-ritual domestic and sexual violence (Salter 2013; Scott 2001). Those studies that have dug further into these dynamics describe environments in which male violence is rampant, and in which both women and girls are required to perform a kind of subordinate femininity, characterised by domesticity, reproductive work and objectification (Scott 2001).

These findings are especially important to highlight, given the fact that many advocates have painted ritual abuse as fundamentally *different* from other forms of abuse, as this article will illustrate. On the contrary, qualitative research with survivors, though in its infancy, indicates that ritual abuse may be best framed using existing models for understanding child abuse and exploitation and violence against women, which emphasise the role of gendered power relations in encouraging, sustaining and legitimising perpetration.

In terms of prevalence, a study of child protection cases conducted in the early 1990s, which defined ritual abuse as ‘accompanied by ceremonies or trappings of the occult, witchcraft or Satanism’, found that it formed the largest single category (n=62, 29%) of organised abuse cases in a sample of police forces and social services (Gallagher et al. 1996: 217-8). The disappearance of ritual abuse from public and political consciousness has resulted in an absence of more up-to-date generalisable data, although recent convictions indicate that abuse of this nature continues to take place in the UK. Since the millennium, a number of cases have been successfully tried; in 2012, self-described ‘High Priest’ Jack Kemp and associate Peter Petruske were convicted for sexually abusing numerous girls in rituals within a Pagan ‘coven’ (Morris 2012). Daggers, sheets, candles and a mask were recovered at one of the homes of the abusers (Morris 2012). In a similar case from 2011, ‘cult’ leader Colin Batley, along with three female accomplices, was found guilty of the abuse and exploitation of children and young adults in a cul-de-sac in Kidwelly, Carmarthenshire. The group reportedly took Alister Crowley’s (1977) *The Book of the Law* as a guide for their actions, which stretched back over three decades (BBC 2011).

These cases have been accompanied by a steady stream of survivors presenting to mental health professionals and other authorities (Salter 2013), as well as those seeking advice through organisations such as the Ritual Abuse Information and Support Network (RAINS) (Buck 2008).

### **Neither ‘sceptics’ nor ‘believers’**

The debate around ritual abuse is often characterised as being fought between ‘believers’ and ‘sceptics’, the former taking an almost naïve position on the reality of events, and the latter an aggressively dismissal one. This description has always failed to encompass the complexities of arguments around ritual abuse. Despite the existence of campaigners early on who appeared to push a simple ‘Believe the Children’ agenda (Clapton 1993), there is also a wealth of material written by child protection professionals and researchers which has taken a far more nuanced, analytical approach to assessing claims (for example, Clapton himself 1993; Goodwin 1994; Scott 2001). To label these people simply ‘believers’ is to insinuate an absence of the critical thought and the extensive research that many have undertaken.

In the tradition of these writers, this paper critiques the actions of a number of survivor advocates, something which has largely remained the domain of ritual abuse ‘sceptics’. As will be illustrated, it is possible – and necessary – to unpack and critique the work of these advocates, and to acknowledge the complexity of ritual abuse cases more generally, without

negating the basic truth of survivor accounts. First, however, this paper centres on the role of the media in the continual construction of ritual abuse allegations as unbelievable.

### **The emergence of ritual abuse**

The evidence base for British cases of ritual abuse emerging in the 1980s and 1990s was undeniably complex. Early investigations suffered from the fact that professionals, including police, had little to no experience managing cases of organised abuse (Goodwin 1994). Although a number of investigations unearthed compelling findings, including stark physical evidence, the course of justice was regularly disrupted by failures in communication between agencies and police, and undermined by the interview techniques used by untrained professionals (Campbell and Jones 1999).

Whilst it would be unfair to suggest that the public uncritically absorb the way social problems are constructed by the media, a number of researchers have demonstrated how press coverage at the time failed to reflect these complexities, and cases were invariably painted as baseless witch-hunts against innocent parents (Campbell and Jones 1999; Kitlinger 2004). Drawing on the media analyses of Cheit (2014) and Kitlinger (2004), the following section charts how two high-profile child abuse ‘scandals’ – in McMartin, California, and in Cleveland, England – appeared to spark media backlash to allegations of child sexual abuse around the years leading into the 1990s. I argue that this backlash shut down the possibility that ritual abuse cases, which emerged during this period, would receive sympathetic or indeed accurate coverage, and demonstrate how a ‘sceptic’ version of events eventually became crystallised in both academic discourse and public recollection.

#### *McMartin: An international scandal*

Cheit (2014) traces ongoing media scepticism of child abuse allegations to one of the most talked-about child abuse ‘scandals’ in American history: the McMartin case.

The McMartin case began in 1983, when Judy Johnson contacted her son’s paediatrician, concerned that he was exhibiting physical signs of sexual abuse, and implicating a ‘Mr Ray’ from his day care centre (Cheit 2014:17). The accusation prompted Manhattan Beach Police Department to arrest and subsequently detain school supervisor Raymond Buckley, and to release a letter requesting information from parents (Sopher 1994). This letter yielded a further wave of accusations from children (Cheit 2014). Of the initial seven defendants that had been identified as suspects in 1984, only two – Buckley and his mother, Peggy – were carried to trial (Sopher 1994). Following the initial hearing, the Buckley’s were acquitted on 52 counts of abuse; the jury deadlocked on the remaining thirteen against Raymond Buckley. He was retried a final time in 1990 on only eight counts; proceedings resulted in a second deadlock, and a declaration of mistrial (Sopher 1994).

The evidence unearthed by the investigation was unlikely to result in an open-and-shut case. Signs of sexual abuse had been confirmed by several doctors in the case of Judy Johnson’s son, and seemingly corroborative statements had been made by various children against the Buckley’s (Cheit 2014). However, despite stating that there was ‘strong, compelling evidence that [Ray and Peggy were] guilty’, the District Attorney dropped the charges against the other defendants, citing evidence as ‘incredibly weak’ (Feldman and Timnick 1986). In addition, the evidence at the core of the investigation was considered fragile, not least because parents had been encouraged to interview their own children (Cheit 2014).

In an analysis of media coverage, Cheit (2014) notes that initial commentary reflected this complexity, with only a few key writers protesting the total innocence of the Buckley’s. However, when the case was declared a mistrial in 1990, a ‘witch-hunt narrative’, spear-headed by vocal journalists – including Debbie Nathan of *Village Voice* and AS Ross of the *San Francisco Examiner*

– came to dominate press coverage. Within this narrative, evidence that could have brought doubt as to the innocence of the Buckleys – including strong medical findings of sexual abuse – was left out, in favour of the conclusion that highly suggestible children had been duped by professionals (Cheit 2014). A number of semi-fictionalised accounts of the trial later solidified this narrative, including Oliver Stone’s award-winning drama *Indictment: The McMartin Trial* (Cheit 2014) which was broadcast on the American premium cable network HBO.

McMartin was the foundational case on which the US ‘witch-hunt narrative’ was built, but by no means its only focus. A key facet of this narrative was the assertion that ‘coercive and suggestive interviews conducted by biased interviewers, combined with hysterical parents and overzealous prosecutors’ had resulted in an epidemic of accusations against innocent men and women (Cheit 2014: 87). This assertion was fuelled by the work of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, who argued that abuse allegations were routinely encouraged by psychotherapists using dubious techniques to extract repressed memories (Raschke 2008). In addition, activist groups, such as ‘Friends of McMartin’ and Victims of Child Abuse Laws (VOCAL), both commented on cases and lobbied widely on the rights of the accused (Campbell and Jones 1999).

It was this ‘backlash’ into which American ritual abuse cases emerged. Information that challenged the witch-hunt narrative was either avoided or distorted by the press. For example, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect’s investigation into ritual abuse in 1994 concluded that, despite lack of evidence for vast networks of cults abusing children, ‘convincing evidence’ was found for cases of abusive individuals, couples, and families ‘who say they are involved with Satan or use this claim to intimidate victims’ (Cheit 2014: 160). Cheit (2014) notes that, despite this, many journalists still held that ‘no physical evidence of ritual abuse had been found’. Individual cases suffered too, like the case of Country Walk, in which day care worker Frank Fuster was sentenced for 165 years in prison after numerous children corroborated his use of abusive ‘satanic’ rituals involving crucifixes and excrement. Within the press, the case was regularly and wrongly described as one in the series of ‘junior McMartins’ plaguing the nation (Cheit 2014: 327).

#### *Cleveland: Closer to home*

At the dawn of the 1990s, a remarkably similar witch-hunt narrative began to take hold of the UK press. Whereas the themes of ‘false memory’ and dubious therapeutic techniques characterised the US narrative, the UK narrative honed in on child protection professionals, or ‘overzealous child-savers’. As in the US, this narrative could be traced back to another high-profile child protection scandal in the county of Cleveland, which provided a powerful anchor for press scepticism.

The Cleveland case occurred in spring of 1987 when 121 children from the county were taken into care (Kitzinger 2000). Using an anal reflex dilation test, paediatricians Marietta Higgs and Geoff Wyatt had diagnosed the children as showing signs consistent with sexual abuse (Campbell 1988). However, parents of the children campaigned against proceedings, claiming the children had been misdiagnosed and the test was unreliable (Kitzinger 2000). They were soon joined by local MP Stuart Bell and police surgeon Alister Irvine, who attacked the social workers and paediatricians at the centre of the case (Kitzinger 2000). The relationship between the social workers and police suffered a significant breakdown, and eventually most of the children were sent home (Campbell 1988).

The case was not only prefaced by the beginnings of coverage on McMartin – which often surfaced in discussions of abuse around this period ‘as [a] paradigmatic example of failure to find evidence’ (Cook and Kelly 1997:79) – but also by a slew of high-profile cases in which press had vilified child protection professionals. Prior to Cleveland, however, social workers were primarily criticised for their *ineffectiveness*, a trend that can be traced back to the infamous case

of Maria Colwell in 1973 (Aldridge 1994). Maria was seven when she was murdered by her stepfather at her home in Brighton, Sussex. Despite reports of maltreatment by onlookers and a number of opportunities for intervention, social workers failed to remove her, and were heavily criticised for their lack of response (Butler and Drakeford 2012). Coverage of the case appeared to cement a stereotype within the press of child protection professions as simultaneously untrained, villainous, bureaucratic and ineffectual (Franklin and Parton 1991). It was this climate that, in 1986, led Cyril Greenland to comment on 'the peculiarly British sport of social worker baiting' (Greenland 1986: 169).

In addition, Cleveland, like McMartin, also proved to be a site of organisation for powerful activist group Parents Against Injustice (PAIN). This group consisted of a number of accused parents from Cleveland who fervently and publicly contested the allegations (Campbell 1988).

These combined factors resulted in coverage that was 'sensational, simplistic, highly critical of the role of social workers ... too willing articulate the parents' case' (Franklin and Parton 1991: 7). Allegations against doctors and social workers were reproduced by the press even after their dismissal by the official inquiry that followed (Franklin and Parton 1991). Though the inquiry stated clearly that very few removals had happened on the *sole* basis of anal dilation, this appeared to be the narrative pursued by the press (Kitzinger 2000). Evidence from the case that could have justified the removal of the children, such as the fact that some had previously been identified as at risk, was shelved, whilst the majority of newspaper column inches were afforded to parents and their supporters (Campbell 1988). The fact that many of the children were returned home was often used to imply that no abuse had occurred; that some children were only allowed to return with safety orders or because the suspected abuser had moved away was glaringly omitted (Campbell 1988).

Like McMartin, Cleveland was constructed – and seemingly remembered – as a scandal in which hysterical 'child savers' pursued baseless allegations, and seemed to spark a similar backlash against child testimony (Campbell and Jones 1999). As a new 'witch-hunt narrative' began to evolve, Cleveland was a constant framing, referred to over 200 times in the coming years in National UK Press and TV News (Kitzinger 2000). Kitzinger notes that these references were not in relation to new, unfolding events, but 'to help tell the story of more recent events' (Kitzinger 2000: 69).

For example, when, in 1991, the Orkney case brought ritual abuse onto the press agenda, the spectre of Cleveland seemed to negate the possibility that it would be reported accurately. The case, in which nine children from five families were taken into care, involved allegations of children being transported to gatherings of adults wearing cloaks, and abused in what appeared to be religious rituals (Clyde 1992). In the official inquiry into the handling of case, Clyde (1992) notes these allegations originated entirely from children's statements, and that the father of a family central to the investigation had been imprisoned in 1987 for 'sadistic and horrific' abuse of his own children (Clyde 1992: 20). This report also noted that the doctor who performed the initial examinations stated signs of 'chronic' penetrative abuse in four of the children (Clyde 1992: 23). However, as Kitzinger's media analysis demonstrates, these details were largely ignored by reporters, who used Cleveland as a template for framing accusations as the result of a witch-hunt (Kitzinger 2000). Incriminating evidence in the case, such as the aforementioned father's previous conviction, was abandoned in an attempt to pursue a reductive description of Orkney as 'only the latest' in a series of 'monumental cock-ups by social workers' (Kitzinger 2000: 65).

From this point onward, the likelihood that ritual abuse cases would receive measured coverage was extremely unlikely. These complex cases became enveloped in a climate many have described as a 'backlash' (Campbell and Jones 1999; Munro 1999), anchoring them in a period of

history characterised by child abuse ‘scandals’ and crisis amongst state agencies. Ritual abuse cases that befell this narrative included the Rochdale case, which was treated as a kind of ‘hyper Cleveland’ by the press (Aldridge 1994: 95), and the Nottingham case, which was routinely described as ‘yet another example of the social work profession gone mad’ (Campbell and Jones 1999: 130). The inclusion of the latter case by the press as part of a wave of false allegations is remarkable when considering that, in February 1989, nine adults at the centre of the allegations were imprisoned for a total of 150 years on 53 charges of abuse; children’s accounts of having taken part in rituals were corroborated by three adults who had not been charged (Cook and Kelly 1997).

### *The historicisation of ritual abuse*

What little press coverage ritual abuse has gained since the millennium has continued to retell the cases of Cleveland, Orkney, Rochdale and Nottingham as a collection of cautionary folk tales: a series of homogenous cases in which allegations were ‘exposed as a myth’ (Waterhouse 2004, in *The Guardian*); ‘injustices against innocent families’ (Addley 2006, also in *The Guardian*); ‘worthless ... extracted by gullible “experts”’ (Thompson 2011, in *The Telegraph*) or simply ‘prove[n] untrue’ (Fox 2012, in *The Independent*). Supporters of the ‘moral panic’ explanation, and those sceptics who argue that repression therapy and ‘false memories’ were to blame for allegations, have enshrined this discourse in academic writing (DeYoung 2004; Loftus and Ketchum 1994; Victor 1993). The ‘witch-hunt narrative’ galvanised within British media discourse has come to be accepted as the ‘common sense’ version of events; Kitzinger’s (2000) own research with focus groups has demonstrated a remarkable acceptance of this narrative among the general public who, in retrospect, view the early 1990s as a period where child abuse was hugely over-diagnosed.

However, what is perhaps particularly unexpected is that the ‘witch-hunt narrative’ has been uncritically reproduced in some ambivalent child protection texts; texts that seemingly have a stake in encouraging the belief and validation of accounts of child abuse. In Corby, Shemming and Wilkin’s most recent addition of *Child Abuse: An Evidence Base for Confident Practice*, the authors describe ritual abuse cases as originating in the US, where ‘allegations and publications about the phenomenon arose in the 1980s’ (Corby et al. 2012: 44). The spate of concerns about ritual abuse ‘disappeared almost as suddenly as it had started’; the only other reference to ritual abuse occurs on page 99, where the authors note it is ‘not included in the 2010 [Department of Health] guidelines’ (Corby et al. 2012: 99). Similarly, ritual abuse is afforded a box in Miller-Perin and Perin’s *Child Maltreatment: An Introduction*, where it is confined to a short period of history known as ‘the Satanism Scare’; the disappearance of visible concern about the subject by the millennium is given as evidence that claims were ‘more imagined than real’ (Miller-Perin and Perin 2013: 302-304).

Conveniently, these texts ignore recent substantiated allegations: the possibility of such abuse still occurring is ultimately negated. Ritual abuse has essentially become ‘historicised’: discussed as an event confined to ‘the past’, rather than an ongoing and poorly-understood problem.

### **The discourse of ritual abuse**

Despite the fact that a wealth of authors have attempted to deconstruct the discourse of disbelief that has permeated so much press coverage and academic commentary on ritual abuse, little attention has been paid to the ‘ritual abuse’ discourse of survivor advocates (Salter 2008). The following discussion addresses this, examining the genealogy of ritual abuse literature and how ‘ritual abuse’ discourse has become increasingly detached from established child protection discourse.

For professionals dealing with the first wave of cases in the 1980s, ritual abuse was a ‘complex and intimidating phenomenon’ for which practice-based literature did not exist (Miller 2012).

Those texts that did grapple with the subject often came in the form of semi-fictionalised accounts, or 'true story' novels that focused on 'exposing a criminal underworld of Satan-worshipping, child-abusing murderers' (Kelly and Scott 1993). Such novels were typically imbued with a Christian evangelism and often sensationalist (Kelly and Scott 1993), a classic being Pazder and Smith's (1980) now-infamous memoir *Michelle Remembers*, largely credited as being the first book to establish the term 'ritual abuse' (Noblitt and Perskin-Noblitt 2008).

Although writing on organised abuse in general was thin, available literature on cults was substantial, partly as the result of an explosion of interest in new religious movements in the 1960s (Long and Hadden 1979). In response to the absence of useful texts on ritual abuse, it appears practitioners turned to this body of work to fill the gaps in their knowledge. Pamela Hudson (1994), a social worker and therapist working with the first wave of cases, described her experience of trying to make sense of what she was hearing from her young clients thus: 'No university or religious expert was at hand in our remote community ... So, in 1986 I have studied in depth the available literature on contemporary occult theory and practice' (Hudson 1994: 74).

As Goodwin (1994) notes, Hudson's process was a common one. The religious and occult connotations of ritual 'led to a search for data about "ritual abuse" in the history of religions, rather than in the history of family violence, political torture, crime and sexual perversion' (Goodwin 1994: 35). The literary genealogy of ritual abuse texts, however, has resulted in some glaring problems, two of which are discussed below.

#### *The displacement of the mundane*

Both Goodwin (1994) and Salter (2008) raise the concern that the influence of cult literature on ritual abuse discourse has resulted in an obfuscation of the relationship between ritual abuse and other more recognised forms of child abuse. In particular, this has meant the links between ritual abuse, the production of child pornography and commercial sexual exploitation have been severed, with the more 'bizarre' elements of survivor's narratives moved into the foreground.

Such a skew can be seen in Sinason's (1994) *Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse*, one of the earlier, more substantial compilations of ritual abuse literature. Here, detailed descriptions of 'satanic' cult practices, occult calendars (Coleman 1994) and excavations of ancient infanticide (Kahr 1994) rub up against texts on case management for local authority staff (Trowell 1994) and case studies of counselling ritually abused children (O'Driscoll 1994). Across almost all of these essays, the framework of 'cults', or 'cult members', is used exclusively to describe perpetrators (Coleman 1994; Colver 1994; Hudson 1994; Kahr 1994; Pooley and Wood 1994; Sinason and Svenson 1994). Alternatively they are described as 'Satanists' (Norton 1994) or members of 'covens' (Bicknell 1994; McDonald 1994). Occasionally perpetrators' motives are framed simply in theological terms – as 'evil' (Casement 1994; Mollon 1994) – though a handful of those writers featured push against this trend, attempting to downplay perpetrator's ideological preoccupations in order to place ritual abuse on the continuum of sexual violence (Goodwin 1994).

This anthology serves as a microcosm of ritual abuse literature up until the present day. Although a number of authors have resisted what Salter (2008) refers to as the 'totalising script of cults', it has occupied a central position in the dominant discourse of ritual abuse. This skew can be seen to impact on general disbelief of ritual abuse allegations in a number of ways.

Firstly, framing perpetrators as primarily *religiously*-motivated 'cult members' disconnects ritual abuse from more established understandings of sexual abuse perpetration. At the time when cases emerged, this was particularly problematic: the notion that ritual abuse was performed by 'evil doers' clashed violently with sociological and feminist understandings of

sexual abuse as the product of patriarchal families, perpetrated not by deviants and ‘weirdos’, but by ordinary men. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, feminists and child protection professionals had worked hard to dismantle the myth of ‘stranger danger’, successfully demonstrating that it was actually fathers, male relations and acquaintances that were most commonly implicated in the abuse of children.<sup>1</sup>

Some child protection professionals at the time were concerned that the discourse around ritual abuse threatened this success. In a content analysis of the social work press in the early 1990s, Clapton (1993) identified a shared concern amongst writers that, in the flurry of interest around ritual abuse, ‘the issue of male sexuality and abuse of power within the family ... [was] being lost sight of’ (Clapton 1993: 13). This perspective is strongly illustrated by the following excerpt from Community Care:

... what has been fairly clearly established – that child sexual abuse happens mainly at home, and is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men – is now being obscured in the public consciousness by the idea that it is being carried out by god hating weirdo devil worshippers who do it at the behest of their satanic master. (Community Care 1991, quoted in Clapton 1993: 14)

Even ‘believers’ expressed discomfort at having to deal with the occult trappings of ritual abuse accounts. In an honest exploration of her own processes interviewing survivors, sociologist Sara Scott (1998) admits that ‘if the gendered patterns of life described by my informants fitted existing knowledge about gender, families and child abuse, then the plausibility of ritual abuse experiences would be increased’ (Scott 1998: 6). There is therefore a possibility that potential allies of survivors already working in child protection may have not only struggled to understand ritual abuse in terms of their existing knowledge, but would have actively avoided cases in fear that they could reverse the hard-earned gains of feminists and child protection professionals working up until this point.

Secondly, as the occult elements of survivor narratives are decontextualised, their accounts are generally rendered thinner, less consistent, and therefore less convincing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, sceptic texts on ritual abuse have tended to indulge in a similar – if far more deliberate – decontextualisation, abducting credibility from and fostering disbelief in accounts of ritual abuse by reducing them to ‘a collection of bizarre claims concerning “human sacrifice”, “cannibalism” and “Satanism”’ (Scott 2001: 6). By focusing the reader’s attention away from survivors’ everyday experiences of more ‘known’ forms of violence and exploitation, and towards the far-less-familiar topics of infanticide and cult practices, advocate texts effectively construct survivors’ narratives in a similar way to those sceptic texts they are attempting to counter.

#### *Mind control*

Since early publications on ritual abuse, the idea that perpetrators practice ‘mind control’ has been supported by a significant number of advocates. Some recent publications on ritual abuse have positioned ‘mind control’ as their primary motive, such as Epstein, Schwartz and Schwartz’s (2011) compendium of essays *Ritual Abuse and Mind Control: The Manipulation of Attachment Needs* and Alison Miller’s *Healing the Unimaginable: Treating Ritual Abuse and Mind Control* (2012). Publications linking the two terms date back to the early 1990s (see, for example, Smith 1993). A considerable sub-section of advocates make more passive references to ‘mind control’ as something that can and is perpetrated by ritually abusive groups; for example, that it ostensibly ‘exists’ (Sinason 2011: 6) or that it is ‘the cornerstone of ritual abuse, the key element in the subjugation and silencing of victims’ (Yoeli and Pratts 2008: 273).

The entrance of 'mind control' into the ritual abuse lexicon can again be understood as an influence of cult literature. Mind control theory was first established to explain how totalitarian regimes used propaganda and torture to seemingly indoctrinate prisoners of war (Walsh, 2001). However, later, the theory was expanded by psychologists Margaret Singer, Jean-Marie Abgrall and others to make sense of how some 'cults' and New Religious Movements succeeded in 'converting' members (see, for example, Abgrall 199; Ofshe and Singer 1986; Singer and Lalich 1995). Through their work, mind-control, otherwise referred to as 'brainwashing', became part of the vocabulary of commentary on cults and new religious movements, and appears to have become a theoretical preserve of this community (Anthony 1999).

The empirical underpinnings of 'brainwashing' theory, however, have been contested ever since its establishment (Bauer 1957; Farber et al. 1957) and remain controversial (Kent 2008). Courts in the US have typically rejected testimonies concerning 'mind control' on the basis that there is little consistent support for the concept across scientific bodies (Anthony and Robbins 1992). Even those who support the possibility that 'cults' and New Religious Movements may use forceful techniques to attempt to indoctrinate members also note that 'mind control' is an extremely subjective and ill-defined concept (Chapman 2013; Walsh 2001). The totalising and somewhat mystical nature of the terms 'mind control' and 'brainwashing' appears at odds with the available empirical evidence, which does not convincingly support the possibility of complete 'thought reform' by cults or other ideological regimes: put simply, these terms are, at best, heavily contested and regarded as overly simplistic (Richardson and Introvigne 2001; Robbins 2002). It is perhaps for these reasons that mind control has been described as being viewed by psychologists as 'science fiction' (Dittman 2002: 1).

The same, however, could be said for the 'existence' of ritual abuse. Given that a wide number of survivors have reported systematic use of trauma and violence by ritually abusive groups (Rutz et al. 2008), and that research on mind control has been somewhat stymied by its controversial status in the scientific community (Zablocki 2001), it is not possible to conclude whether it ostensibly 'exists'. However, it *is* possible to conclude that, having invited a shaky and poorly-supported concept seemingly uncritically into ritual abuse literature, advocates have further reduced the possibility that survivor accounts will be taken seriously.

### **The 'bizarreness' of ritual abuse**

Although there appears to be little agreement between 'sceptics' and 'believers' as to the veracity of ritual abuse accounts, both camps are frequently united in their evaluation of such accounts as 'bizarre'. However, once ritual abuse is placed within the wider social and cultural context of late-modern experience, it is possible to see why tales of religiously-motivated perpetrators committing extremely violent and sadistic abuse against children might be rendered particularly (in)credible. The following section is shaped by the research of Scott (2001) and Salter (2013), both of whom have explored the socio-cultural aspects of the denial of ritual abuse in Western countries.

#### *Birth, death and abject horror in late modern societies*

First, accounts of ritual abuse are often marked by visceral descriptions of birth, death and sex as violent, unsafe and unregulated. Survivors describe lives born of sexual violence, pregnancies which are ended through illegal abortion, and babies delivered in the home, far from sanitation and professional observation (Scott 2001). Their young lives are spent in close proximity to death, including witnessing murder and the killing of animals and pets, and being forcibly brought into contact with human and animal corpses (Scott 2001).

These experiences of bodily pain and abject horror, of the tangibility of death and extreme violence, are both experientially and conceptually alien to most members of late-modern societies, as they have been largely moderated through the processes of institutionalisation,

medicalisation and risk-management. Late modernity is characterised by a degree of order and control over transgressions of safety and comfort (Giddens 1991); births and deaths have been relocated from the family home, to the rooms of hospitals, hospices and nursing homes, where access is both restricted and mediated by 'specialists' (Zweig and Parker-Oliver 2009). Whereas in early twentieth century it would have been common to see a body after death, corpses in twenty-first century Britain are typically confined to closed caskets, or hidden from the bereaved in the case of traumatic or disfiguring deaths (Chapple and Ziebland 2010).

In the West, stories of torture, infanticide and human sacrifice are largely confined to fiction, or displaced to 'zones of fear' overseas (Salter 2008: 163). It is perhaps understandable, then, that accounts of ritual abuse would seem 'bizarre', or at least extremely unfamiliar to those living in Britain today: neither the lived experience nor social construction of late-modernity allow for the existence of such violence 'in our own backyard' (Scott 2001).

#### *The (im)potency of religion in late modern societies*

Another factor in the perceived (in)credibility of ritual abuse accounts may be that perpetrators appear heavily influenced by religion. Late modernity, on the contrary, has been characterised by a movement toward secularism (Neville 2002). Although considerable work on religion has classified Europeans in general as 'Believing without Belonging', recent analysis suggests that most Britons are religious primarily through passive affiliation (Voas and Crockett 2005). If religious beliefs are held, they are the project of the individual, rather than the collective; they are characterised within both popular and academic discourse as dynamic and optional, rather than fixed and all-encompassing (Wade 2011).

The notion that British people's religion is an increasingly irrelevant, or at least ineffectual, element of their lives has been further solidified by recent conversations about the religion and 'culture' of others (Dustin and Phillips 2008; Humphrey 2007). Concerns about terrorism and 'abuses of culture' – such as forced marriage and female genital mutilation – have mobilised a reductive model of the 'culture' of immigrants, which constructs their beliefs as homogeneous and wholly-binding (Dustin and Phillips 2008; Wade 2011). Aside from simple racist motivations, the relative *visibility* of the faith of immigrant 'others' may explain why crimes linked to 'their' faith and belief appear not to have been met with the same disbelief that has hindered efforts to support survivors of ritual abuse.

To illustrate this point, consider how allegations of child abuse linked to a belief in witchcraft and spirit-possession – the vast majority of which occur within immigrant communities – have been taken relatively seriously. Following the case of Victoria Climbié in 2001, in which two carers subjected an eight-year-old girl to fatal abuse during a 'deliverance' service after branding her possessed (House of Commons Health Committee 2003), there has been a number of policy developments around this form of abuse, including the creation of safeguarding guidelines for local authorities (Department for Education and Skills 2007), the establishment of a national action plan (The National Working Group on Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief 2012), and official recognition of such abuse by the British government (House of Commons Education Committee 2012). Available data on press coverage suggests that journalists appear generally sympathetic to the reality of these cases; indeed, the proposition that accusations may be fabricated *en masse* has not been put forward (Briggs et al. 2011).

In comparison, the notion that 'we' (non-immigrants) could commit crimes on the basis of religion is not supported by the idea that our faith is, at best, a transient and largely insignificant element of our lives. Not only are stories of ritual abuse plainly unfamiliar in the context of the lives of most British people but they also do not make sense within late modern discourse on religion and faith, which positions the West as a secular, rational actor.

### Discussion and conclusion

The recent re-emergence of organised abuse onto the UK's public and political agenda presents a new and crucial opportunity to address the subject of ritual abuse once more. However, if advocates wish to step forward to call for recognition and justice for survivors, the evidence presented here suggests they will not go unchallenged.

This evidence illustrates that the persistent disbelief surrounding accusations of ritual abuse can be understood as something other than outright denial, or a more implicit wish not to know. Instead, the analysis shows that this disbelief is a largely socially-constructed phenomenon with multiple contributors and that, in turn, there are some steps that advocates and their allies may begin to take to proactively challenge it.

The first requires us to recognise that press and sceptical academic publications have been reasonably successful in 'historicising' ritual abuse. Even in practical child protection texts, the now-irrelevant cases of Cleveland, Orkney, Rochdale and Nottingham are summoned to construct ritual abuse as an isolated period of hysteria confined to the early 1990s. It is necessary, therefore, that these cases are consigned to history, and that any new conversation about ritual abuse brings to the fore recent research and convictions, which demonstrate, at least on a fundamental level, that ritual abuse is still both a pertinent and legitimate problem despite its disappearance from the public eye.

The second of these steps involves addressing the 'ritual abuse' discourse. The mystical terminology of 'cults' and 'mind-control' may have, up until this point, provided advocates with a shared lexicon with which to discuss cases. However, aside from being questionable descriptors of abusive networks and their practices of manipulation, such terms obscure the links between ritual abuse and other forms of organised abuse and child sexual exploitation. They also highlight elements of survivors' narratives that may seem particularly bizarre and, therefore, unbelievable in the context of twenty-first century Britain.

What is clear here is that, despite its occult trappings and relative 'extremeness', ritual abuse does not warrant being put into a special category away from other forms abuse. The evidence presented here suggests a movement away from this esoteric 'ritual abuse' discourse is needed, together with an effort to *emphasise* the overlaps between ritual abuse, and those more 'established' forms of abuse and exploitation whose existence is not subject to debate. Closing this gap will be vital in order to address inaction on the subject and to create a supportive and validating social environment for survivors; an environment which they have historically been denied.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, the highly influential works of Judith Herman (1981), Diana Russell (1983), Liz Kelly (1988). For an overview, see Scott (2001: 23 - 28)

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