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HYDRANT PROGRAMME
Supporting child protection and abuse investigation

Organised ritual abuse and its wider context:

Degradation, deception and disavowal

A research review and analysis by Dr Elly Hanson

Commissioned by the Hydrant Programme and NAPAC

July 2025

Note to readers

This document contains descriptions of child abuse that are distressing. Please prioritise your well-being - feel free to skip sections, take breaks or choose not to continue reading.

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About the author

Dr Elly Hanson is a clinical psychologist and researcher who has worked with the issue of sexual abuse for over twenty years: conducting research, training and assessments; reviewing and analysing the research literature; informing police and social work practice; contributing to preventative education; and supporting and working with survivors. She undertakes expert witness work and is an experienced therapist.

Acknowledgements

This report is dedicated to Lorna and her wildflowers: Thank you for the privilege of journeying with you, for the trust you place in me, and for all that you have taught and inspired in me along the way.

I am indebted to all those who have contributed to this report. Thank you to the researchers whose work forms its focus; thank you to all those who have gifted me with their wisdom, insights and review; and most of all, thank you to the victims and survivors of these crimes whose voices we so urgently need to listen and learn from.

1. Introduction

Humans have the potential to treat one another with extreme cruelty and this report deals with behaviour of this worst kind – people going to the limits of their imagination and power to hurt children, as well as often other adults. To identify and surface the nature of ritual abuse and the abuses surrounding it, I draw extensively on the testimony of victims and survivors which[1], if we take seriously, has deep emotional impact. This report therefore comes with an alert to this – throughout severe abuse and torture are described – readers will need to listen to themselves, judging if, when, and how to read. It also comes with an invitation to those who feel able – to deeply listen, think about, and feel what is shared, and in so doing, contribute to the collective effort necessary to respond rightfully to this most horrific of crimes.

What is being referred to here by the term 'organised ritualistic abuse'? This can of course be defined in various ways, but the focus of this report is on the following:

> "The organised sexual, physical and psychological abuse of children (and often adults) by a group of individuals who use rituals as a form of prolonged and repeated torture (often alongside other forms of abuse) with the aim of controlling, silencing and terrorising their victims. As part of this control, perpetrators train children into a supernatural belief system, which they may or may not believe themselves. Ritualised abuse typically involves family members (for example, parents and their associates abusing their children) and starts when children are young (the UK National Police Chiefs' Council definition of ritualistic abuse, used within the Complex and Organised Child Abuse Database - COCAD)"

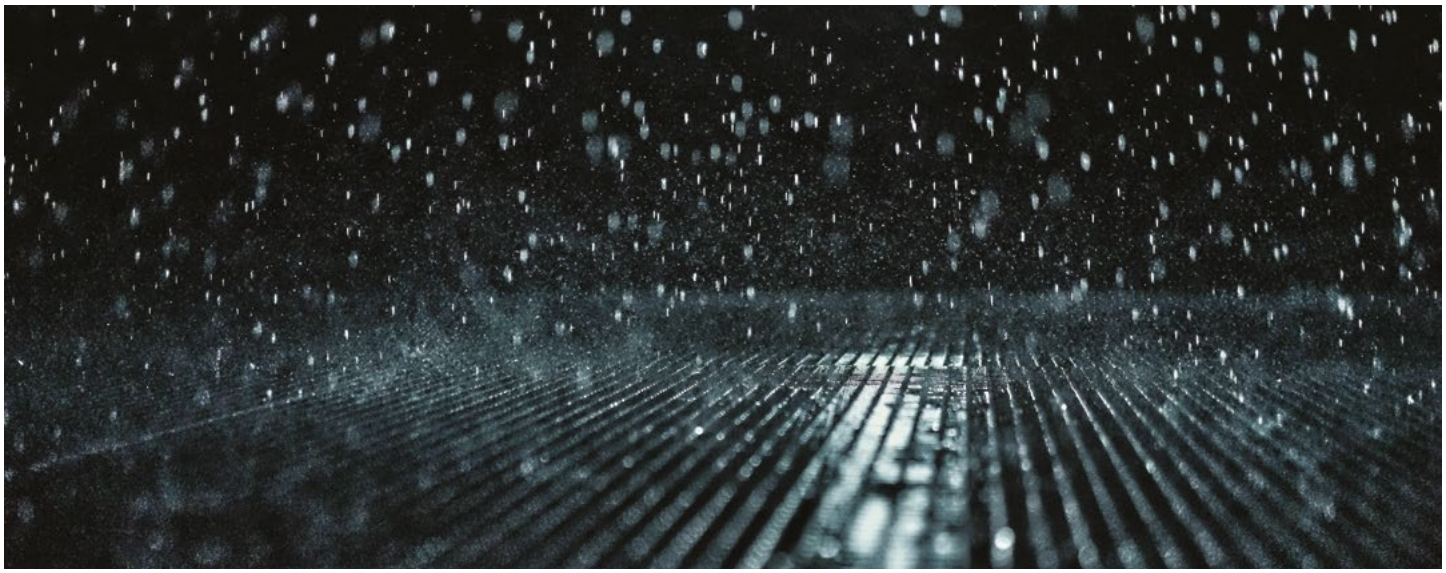
Following feminism's relative success in the 1970s and 1980s in getting societies in the Western world[2] to take child sexual abuse more seriously, a substantial number of people have reported[3] childhood abuse of this nature. Survivors describe it as involving specific, regular instances of ritualised abuse occurring against a backdrop of other more frequent forms of child maltreatment, such as neglect, physical abuse, commercial sexual abuse, and 'everyday' sexual abuse.[4]

1 As is normal practice, I use the term 'victims and survivors' (or one or other, interchangeably) to refer to those who have self-identified as such. This usage does not denote an ideological belief in all allegations of ritual abuse. Issues around credibility, truth and falsity are explored in depth later in this report.

2 This report focusses on organised ritual abuse involving sexual abuse and taking place within the West (roughly Europe, the Americas and Australasia), with at points a spotlight on the British context. Child abuse involving organised ritualistic practices is also reported in other world regions, in particular Africa (Chisholm et al., 2022; Owusu, 2022). Some of this abuse has similarities and intersects with the ritual abuse covered here, and perpetrators can mix ideologies from diverse cultures. Therefore what is covered here will have relevance for some of the organised ritual abuse perpetrated in other regions. In parallel the organised ritual abuses of other regions merit their own focus, especially given some different forms that these can take (Owusu, 2022). Rituals and supernatural beliefs used primarily / solely to traffic adults and adolescents is not a focus of this report, nor is the 'sacrificial' murder of children primarily committed (it seems) to bring luck or avoid ill fortune.

3 Disclosures have in the main been made to therapists, foster carers, helpline practitioners, social workers, other support practitioners, and researchers, although many victims have also reported to the police (discussed in more depth later).

4 The term 'everyday' is not meant as a minimisation of this abuse, but rather to describe its routine nature and occurrence on a daily or weekly basis. The 'everyday' nature of this abuse is central to its harms and horror, as it was inescapable, without respite.



Therefore whilst this report is focussed on organised abuse including ritual elements, much of it is also relevant to understanding and responding to organised child abuse without these – for example, families who sexually abuse, pimp and traffic their children (profiting from their rape), and paedophile rings creating and sharing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) working through families and institutions.[5] And there is also relevance to situations in which single offenders have used rituals and supernatural beliefs in their abuse.

Historically, there have often been debates over whether abuse was 'ritual abuse' or not, with some seeming to argue that it does not qualify as such if there are not religious motivations (Salter, 2008a). In accordance with the definition above, this is not the approach taken here – rather the focus is on the victims' experiences and how the abuse was narrated to them. Whether or not narratives about supernatural deities (etc.) are believed by offenders, they are useful in justifying and fuelling the abuse, and in terrorizing, silencing and blaming the children (Behrendt et al., 2020; Salter, 2012; Scott, 2001).

In light of the considerable debate and controversy around allegations of ritual abuse (discussed below), some have argued that attention should instead be focussed on the wider patterns of abuse here, such as the frequent intrafamilial, commercial and sadistic elements. In this report I aim to take a 'both/and' approach: it is true that a focus on ritual aspects has often obscured this wider picture, and it is also the case that when these elements are present, they often hold particular horror, terror and shame for survivors (Scott, 2001; Salter, 2013a). We do survivors an injustice if we focus on one dimension (ritual or non-ritual) at the expense of the other, and furthermore, we will miss the ways in which they can interact and fuel one another. All elements of this complex abuse picture merit more considered attention that foregrounds the voices of survivors.

This report unpacks the nature of organised ritual abuse, its motives and dynamics, the harm it causes and the barriers survivors face in speaking out. It also explores the societal context in which this abuse occurs, one that is found to be characterised by silence, inaction, and an unwarranted discourse of disbelief, sitting alongside various 'conspiracy fictions. All in all, there is evidence for a grievous situation in which this extreme abuse is the most shadowed, leaving its victims in ongoing abuse and/or without validation, support and justice. I end with a look at ways forward, outlining various actions that would substantively help to prevent this abuse and support those affected by it.

5 Networks of online offenders are not within the report's purview, given that these individuals do not tend to commit abuse of children whilst physically present together. However, much of the CSAM these groups share with one another has originated from the offline organised groups discussed here (Canadian Centre of Child Protection, 2017; Salter & Woodlock, submitted)

2. Convictions for ritualistic and/or organised intrafamilial child abuse

> "We have a stunning ability to forget such cases, to respond to each new atrocity as if it were the first… without long memories we cannot make connections, and an absence of connection means we continue to reproduce old myths, and even create a few new ones on the way."
>
> Liz Kelly (1998)

In the UK, there have been at least 14 cases in which people have been convicted of sexually abusing children and their use of ritualistic practices in this process was widely acknowledged, either within the criminal or family courts.[6] Nine of these involved more than one perpetrator. In addition, there have been convictions for sexual abuse similar in nature to organised ritualistic abuse, involving multiple family members sadistically sexually abusing and/or torturing their children, as well as forcing them to have sex with others, over the course of their childhoods.[7]

Expanding upon a few of these cases provides insight into some of the practices and dynamics at play.[8] In 1982, couple Malcolm and Susan Smith together with Susan's sister and husband, Albert and Carole Hickman, were convicted for crimes relating to the sexual abuse of four children ranging in age from one to 15 years old. Malcolm Smith convinced the children he was 'Lucifer', and this was said to be 'largely a subterfuge by which children and young girls were ensnared' (The Guardian, 1982). He carved an inverted cross on one child's abdomen, inserted a lit candle into her anus and vagina, and branded her genitals with a hot altar knife. In 2015, Albert and Carole Hickman were convicted for further ritualistic sexual abuse after a woman came forward after she recovered memories of this abuse during counselling for bereavement in 2011. The court heard how Carole Hickman convinced the girl she was part of a powerful witches' coven and held her down whilst her husband raped her. She used threats of black magic and cut the victim with a knife. The girl had reported the abuse to the police when it happened, but her claims were dismissed by officers who judged a married woman to be incapable of such horrors.

In 1998, the daughter and stepson of a convicted sex offender, Michael Horgan, came forward to speak out in detail about the abuse that he had subjected them to, in protest at him being released after having served only half of his ten-year sentence (McMullan & Revell Walton, 1999).

6 These are as follows: Malcolm and Susan Smith, and Albert and Carolee Hickman (The Guardian, 1982; Mullin, 2015); Shaun Wilding (Birmingham Evening Mail, 1986); Brian Williams (Evison, 1987); Hazel Paul and others (Daily Post, 1988); The 'T' family (Donnelly & Stewart, 1989); Reginald Harris (Rees, 1990); a case in Liverpool (Daily Post, 1992); Michael Horgan (McMullan & Revell Walton, 1999); a case in Ealing (The Birmingham Post, 1993); a case in Swansea (The Guardian, 1994); David and Bette Stalford (Nutall, 2004); Colin and Elaine Batley, Jacqueline Marling and Shelly Millar (The Daily Telegraph, 2011); Peter Petrauske and Jack Kemp (The Independent, 2012); and within the past year, seven individuals in Glasgow (Scott, 2023; BBC, 2024, 2025).

7 Nine individuals convicted for sexual offences in the West Country (Lakeman, 1998); Marie Black, Michael Rogers, Jason Adams & Carol Stadler (The Guardian, 2015).

8 I am indebted to journalist Tim Tate and retired police officer Carole Mallard who kept detailed notes of these cases from media reporting at the time; these have been shared with me and, alongside media articles that I have identified, inform the case summaries here.

He had been prosecuted alongside five others in 1992 for the organised, ritualistic abuse of several children, the youngest being two, yet media attention appears to have been scant at that time. Philomena, his daughter, shared with the News of the World how he and other men had taken her and her stepbrother to a local moor regularly where they were sexually abused together with other children, with ceremonies, crosses, chains, whips, and a snake used in the process. She also described her father building a 'black magic altar' in their attic, tying the children's hands and hanging them from hooks before they were then sexually assaulted by him and others. Her stepbrother, Michael, also shared how his stepfather had 'tied me and my mate together and made us do things to each other while his friends watched' and that when he was older, his stepfather 'and his mates would take me to the park and sell me to men'.

In 1992, an extensive investigation was launched in Wales following a ten-year-old boy's disclosures to his foster carers of sexual abuse of himself and other children by his father and other adults. Other children corroborated his allegations, leading to a trial of 12 individuals, of whom six were convicted. The jury heard that children aged from two years old upwards were sexually abused in isolated barns and sheds in Pembrokeshire and subjected to a terrifying mix of violence, threat and ritualistic practices, including a boy having a shot gun fired at him and being thrown out of a boat into the sea; children being tied up and knives put to their throats; and goats and chickens being slaughtered and their blood poured on gravestones prior to rapes.

'As horrifying it was, we had to embrace that horror to understand what had happened'

In 1998, eight people based in Devon were convicted for a total of 100 years for sexual abuse offences spanning 35 years. This abuse was intergenerational, involving grandparents who had taught their children to abuse their own, and sadistic, involving razor blades, pick-axe handles, pitch forks and knitting needles (the latter used in abortions) (Lakeman, 1998; Lindy Brown, interview). These abusers not only raped the children (aged 3-15 years old), but also invited friends and neighbours to do so. A sleeping eight-year-old girl was taken into woods to be tied up and gang raped 20 times. Children were tied to chairs in order to be raped and tortured. Abuse within the family had originally been reported 30 years prior but had not been taken seriously; this time round it came to the authorities' attention through the concerted complaints of 14 members of the extended family.

The court case centred on the testimony of two female victims, approximately 15 and 19 years old. Lindy Brown, whom I interviewed about the case, was the manager of the NSPCC's young witness support project at the time and supported the eldest over the course of trial, sitting in it throughout. She described a process in which the victims withstood aggressive cross-examination by numerous barristers representing different defendants, but which was held together by a judge who was able to face the horror of what the victims described. Over 25 years on, the trial had left her fundamentally changed as a person, having taken her into depths of depravity she had never before witnessed: 'I'd been 10-11 years post qualified and most of the work I'd done with the NSPCC had been child sexual abuse… and I'd never heard anything like it… what was discussed was so horrific that I have never been able to talk about it… it's the only work that I've done where that's been the case. I would be worried that if [others] had that information, they'd feel like I felt. It was beyond anything that I'd ever heard or imagined, or that I've subsequently heard.'

One of the many difficult things was processing the fact that the men who married the daughters of the perpetrators became perpetrators themselves within this organised abuse – the implications of this were existential: 'Married men in Kent who became part of that abuse – on an intellectual level I can understand how that happens, but you know that's terrifying… how they got in touch, how they knew they were those kind of people, or is it that in the right kind of circumstances anybody's capable?'

She described the abuse involving children being coerced into sexual acts with one another, and the impact of it being such that the three older sisters of the two victims in court had committed suicide, and the youngest of the two later went onto.

This case underscored to her the importance of being able to hold in mind 'worst case scenarios' in child protection work, something she felt was missing from much of current practice. Relatedly, she observed how even though more recently there had been allegations of abuse relating to this family, there was no attempt within social services to join up the dots and draw on insights from the past, instead there was a blinkered approach justified as 'dealing with things on a case-by-case basis'.

In 2023, eight individuals in Glasgow were found guilty of crimes of child sexual abuse and/or other forms of child maltreatment, and in early 2025 seven of them were given life sentences for this abuse.[9] Five of these individuals were found guilty of attempting to murder a young girl who they had pushed into a microwave and trapped in other places. The court also heard that she had been raped whilst still being young enough to wear nappies, forced to eat dog food, locked in a cupboard with a box full of spiders, hung by her clothes with a nail, and chased by people wearing devil masks.

Four children in total had been subjected to sexual abuse, gang rapes and violence by the group. Two individuals were also found guilty of child neglect. In sentencing remarks, the judge commented on the 'agonising articulacy' of one of the victims in her impact statement, commenting that 'in stark contrast to what was inflicted on her and its impact, an impression of innate humanity shines through her words'.

Looking beyond the UK, Project Jericho in Prescott, Canada is worthy of mention as it highlights both the scale to which networks of abusers can reach, and what determined, thoughtful and holistic practice can achieve in tackling them. In August 1989, a group of three siblings in foster care disclosed sexual abuse by family members involving 'monster games' in the basement in which adults dressed up in sheets and masks and raped them, cut them with knives, forced them to drink blood and mud, and locked them in a dungeon (Gummer, n.d.; Miller, 1995). A joint social work and police team was set up to investigate, with ring-fenced funding, involvement of a specialist prosecutor, and support from the local mayor. Medical evidence and that gathered from the home corroborated the children's reports, and the team gradually unearthed an intergenerational network of abusers stretching across four families. These abusers also included distant relatives and friends, and in addition, several 'lone paedophiles' targeted the same children (Gummer, no date; Miller, 1995). Centrally held resources were made available to the investigation as it grew, and a specialist therapeutic team was set up to support the children (Gummer, n.d.; Miller, 1995).

9 The delay was caused by delays in assessments of the offenders commissioned to inform sentencing.

When media descended on the town, interested in the 'scandal' and the allegations involving prominent individuals, the mayor helped focus attention instead on the investigative efforts, and instilled a narrative of community pride: rather than the town of Prescott becoming synonymous with horror, it was the town that had 'confronted a catastrophe' and successfully rescued children from abuse (Campbell, 2023). By October 1994, there were 162 victims identified (1 in 4 of the town's children) and 119 suspected perpetrators. Sixty-five were charged, and 91% of these convicted (Gummer, n.d.).

Across all forms of crime, convictions reflect 'the tip of the iceberg' – for every crime ending in conviction, there are many more that do not (termed 'the dark figure'). And for crimes of sexual abuse, the proportions of undetected and unconvicted offending are even greater – reflective of the crime leaving little evidence beyond the victim's testimony, and victims often being too fearful, ashamed, intimidated, hopeless, or full of self-blame to report to police or child protection services (Morrison, Bruce & Wilson, 2018; Patterson, Greeson & Campbell, 2009; Scurich & John, 2019; Somer & Szwarcberg, 2001). When we consider abuse involving multiple offenders acting in concert to terrorise children, this picture gets even bleaker – the barriers to reporting growing in number and size, so that very few victims report. And the few that do are often met with responses that are inadequate at best, and harmful at worst (all this unpacked below). In addition, prosecutors may be uninterested in ritualistic elements of the abuse, and so omit them from the criminal case, given their focus on the core crimes of rape and sexual assault, and the risk that the ritual aspects prove an unhelpful distraction, inviting fascinated horror and kneejerk disbelief (Scott, 2001).

In short, the cases discussed in this section are indicative of a much wider picture of organised and/or ritualistic child abuse, and they are unlikely to be fully representative of it (for example, those cases that get to court are likely to involve less effective control of victims than those that do not). Subsequent sections therefore focus on this wider picture, drawing upon survivors' reports to researchers, as well as to therapists and other support persons.

3. The nature of research into organised ritualistic (and related) abuse

It was in the late 1980s that research into organised ritualistic child abuse first really began, and over the course of the 1990s a sizeable number of studies were published, primarily case series of therapists' patients who reported this abuse (for example, Coleman, 1994; Fraser, 1990; Young et al., 1991), but also including analyses of state and voluntary sector organised abuse cases (including those involving ritual), as well as professional surveys and an analysis of helpline data (for example, Gallagher et al., 1996; Scott, 1993).

Since then, it appears studies have been less frequent, although three research projects have substantially deepened insight and understanding. In 2001, Sara Scott published a seminal study involving twelve in-depth life history interviews with survivors of ritual abuse, following a wider survey completed by 36 (Scott, 2001). This was followed in the early 2010s by Michael Salter's research of similar methodology with 21 survivors of organised child abuse (16 of whom reported ritualistic elements) and professionals supporting this client group (Salter, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2017, 2019).[10] And then more recently, in Germany a research group has explored the issue through survivor and professional surveys alongside analysis of submissions on this topic to the German Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual abuse, all-in-all resulting in eight academic papers (for example, Schröder et al., 2018, Schröder, Nick et al., 2020). In addition, case series, surveys and other analyses continue to be published, contributing to the broader body of knowledge.

10 Salter published his findings in a book and across several journal articles referenced in this report. Later academic papers also included analysis of 9 further survivors of organised abuse.

Turning to wider research, over the past 40 years there have been a variety of studies delineating other forms of organised child abuse (such as parental production of child sexual abuse images and familial child trafficking). As noted above, such abuse is typically the wider context for ritualistic abuse (whilst not usually seeming to involve it). And there is much that childhoods controlled by paedophile rings have in common, even when groups have abused and terrorised children in different ways. Some survivors taking part in these studies share that their abuse involved ritual elements, and indeed this is also the case in research exploring other forms of sexual abuse, such as that perpetrated by siblings (for example, Carlson et al., 2006; Pacheco, Buenaventura & Miles, 2023).

Alongside this research, there is a literature exploring treatment approaches for survivors of ritualistic abuse who are often struggling with a variety of complex needs (for example, Miller, 2018; Ross, 2017; Schwartz, 2013; Sinason, 1994), and a parallel set of papers, theses and books arguing that ritual abuse allegations are a product of moral panic and the like (for example, Goodwin, 2018; Nathan, 2017; Victor, 1998). These tend to be hypothesis pieces that comment on perceived societal trends and they, along with numerous sceptical accounts in the popular press, comprise the discourse of disbelief. A further literature on false memories is often drawn upon to make the case for disbelief.

Relevant also to understanding organised and ritualistic abuse and its context and impact are other research fields that look at topics such as the psychology of groups (in particular group offending); the use and power of rituals; people's reactions to injustice; and the psychology of trauma and dissociation.

Given the core aim of this report to delineate the nature, motives, dynamics and harms of ritualistic and related organised abuse (resting on the logical and evidenced position that allegations of ritual abuse should be taken seriously, discussed below), I foreground studies that use primary research methods,[11] and consider their findings in the context of the wider literature outlined above.

11 As is apparent from this section, this mainly comprises clinical, interview, and survey studies of survivors and relevant professionals. I am aware of no studies that systematically seek the perspectives of ritual abuse or wider organised intrafamilial abuse offenders, however this perspective is at times visible, and I draw on wider research on perpetrator psychology.

4. Lives navigating 'everyday' abuse and cruelty

Most survivors of organised ritualistic abuse report adult family members as their primary perpetrators (Salter, 2012; Schröder et al., 2018; Schröder, Behrendt et al., 2020a; Scott, 2001). Looking across life histories recounted by this group of survivors, we see both striking diversity and commonality. On the one hand, there is wide socioeconomic variance – some describe families that are highly affluent and well-connected, whilst others those that are struggling with poverty and debt. In addition, some are highly regimented and project an image of 'the perfect family' whilst in others there is chaos and mental health difficulty visible to the outside eye. However, across practically all the recorded accounts of survivors of intrafamilial organised ritual abuse, there are common themes of dominance and control (usually exerted most forcefully by fathers); neglect of children's emotional (and often physical) needs; and routine cruelty towards them – especially towards girls (Scott, 2001; Salter, 2013a). Essentially these survivors report navigating childhoods in which those tasked to care for and protect them were instead colossal and constant sources of danger.[12]

The abuse this group of survivors recount includes routine sexual abuse from family members that typically started in their early years, often involved sadistic elements, and interweaved with other forms of abuse as well as neglect.

> "There was always violence of some description. It usually started with a beating and ended up with a sexual assault, but after that you would be confined to the room, tied to the bed, not allowed food, not allowed to drink, not allowed to go to the toilet... my dad quite often... when I was not allowed out of the room... his favourite was to come and urinate on me."
>
> Survivor Kathleen[13] quoted by Scott (2001)

> "He also used to do nice things to me like pissing on me when I was in the bath and putting my head down the toilet and putting faeces in my mouth. Nice, you know, nice stuff like that... I hate him... and um in that room I can remember him and my uncle when one of them would be at one end and, holding my shoulders down while the other was... one time he put a pencil inside me. They put the pencil into my navel as well. Sometimes I can't bear clothing touching my stomach... I can't abide anything in the vicinity of my navel because it's one of the things they did to torture me. They had all these yellow pencils that Dad got from work."
>
> Gillian quoted by Scott (2001)

12 Note this is also the common experience of victims of intrafamilial organised abuse not involving ritualistic practices. For example, in their interview study of male survivors of intrafamilial trafficking, Pacheo et al. (2023) found that nine of the ten reported 7 or more of the 10 items on the Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale (which includes maltreatment experiences such as emotional neglect, physical neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and living with domestic abuse).

13 All first names cited in this report denote survivors and are the pseudonyms used in the original publications.

Many survivors report sexual abuse being so frequent that it was simply a backdrop to their life – for this abuse, as is normal, they tend to report gist memories (Goodman-Delahunty, Nolan & van Gijn-Grosvenor et al., 2017) versus having clear recall for many specific instances.

> “I do remember my dad would quite often insert things into me, his hand was his favourite. It got to be normal, I used to just relax, and it didn’t hurt as much. It was so ordinary, I didn’t think ‘Oh my God, what are you doing?’”
>
> Sinead quoted by Scott (2001)

> “I can remember what I call normal abuse… it was just my father. That was pretty much a regular occurrence as much as eating my meals actually. I can’t really distinguish particularly… It would happen at home or he used to take me for walks in the park. He used to say we’re going shopping and in the car park… anywhere really… I don’t think it really bothered him at all.”
>
> Kate quoted by Scott (2001)

Often running alongside this sexual abuse and sadistic cruelty are dynamics of enforced servitude and ‘divide and rule’ (Scott, 2001; Salter, 2013a) – so for example, some survivors describe being tasked with major household duties and looking after their siblings, with some reporting that they were the only one that was treated like this, or that was neglected or abused in a particular way.

> “We acted like adults, I never felt like a child. When I was a little girl, I was always an adult.”
>
> Colleen quoted by Salter (2013a)

> “The house was freezing cold, always. But I just got used to that, and in the end, I was completely unable to differentiate between hot and cold, because my bedroom at home as well… I was the only one… I didn’t have blankets on my bed at all… but my brothers on the other hand had blankets in their bedroom. They were treated differently by both my parents and my grandparents; they used to get fed properly as well.”
>
> Sophie quoted by Scott (2001)

Essentially in these families the normal desires to nurture and love children appear absent, and children are instead approached as slaves and playthings – as beings to be hurt, tormented and controlled.[14] In such circumstances, children are dealing with highly distressing and terrifying situations on a routine basis, yet expression of these feelings (for example, through crying or screaming), or dealing with them through fight or flight responses, would significantly increase the danger. Survivors recall how such behaviours would be punished, and the considerable pressure they were placed under to act as if everything was OK, to keep up appearances. There was the regular message conveyed through many means that their thoughts, their feelings, indeed their very experience of reality were both invalid and irrelevant.

> "He would tell you what you were thinking and what you were feeling, and you had to agree: 'you did that because you were insolent'... one time, I was trying so hard not to cry, but I couldn't help it, and then I would start crying, and it'd be 'Oh you see, now you are turning on the water works, trying to be manipulative'."
>
> Jo quoted by Salter (2013a)

> "I think, I recall, a lot of my childhood life not making any sense because what happened during the day was very different to what happened at the night, or on weekends. What was happening was the total opposite to what was being portrayed during the day, you know, the whole Brady Bunch thing. Mum, dad, kids, everything looks hunky dory. It was the opposite to that."
>
> Isabelle quoted by Salter (2013a)

> "It wasn't only a question of telling, you had to not draw attention to yourself... you're not a troublemaker or having problems, but you're not drawing attention to yourself the other way as well [i.e. excelling]. You've got to be fairly average, particularly not be noticed."
>
> Jo quoted by Salter (2013a)

To survive such circumstances, children draw on a formidable set of coping skills and adaptations, including hypervigilance and learning to read perpetrators' mindsets and moods; appeasement strategies, typically involving shame and self-blame; and knowing whilst not-knowing, involving dissociation (DePrince et al., 2012; Herman, 1992; McCollum, 2015).[15]

A proportion of survivors of organised abuse do not identify family members as perpetrators but instead describe being targeted by offenders operating through institutions such as schools, care homes, and churches (Gallagher et al., 1996; Gerke et al., 2024; Salter, 2013a; Scott, 2001). Whilst there are some different dynamics at play in such situations, the themes of routine sexual abuse and sadism remain. And for both, commercial and imaged sexual abuse are further typical elements, as unpacked below.

14 See section below on perpetrator psychology.
15 Discussed further below in the section on impact.

5. The dimensions of commercial and imaged child sexual abuse

Alongside this 'everyday cruelty' many victims of organised and ritual abuse are also bought and sold to be raped (pimped and trafficked) and have their sexual abuse photographed and filmed (to make child sexual abuse material: CSAM). In their survey study of 165 self-reported survivors of organised abuse (88% of whose included ritual),[16] Schröder, Nick et al. (2020) found that 91% reported commercial sexual exploitation, and 90% reported that their abuse involved CSAM production. And in their parallel survey of healthcare professionals who support survivors of organised/ritual abuse, even higher proportions reported that their clients' abuse included these elements (96% and 94% respectively).

Complementing these findings, a study that instead focussed on CSAM survivors found that many reported this CSAM abuse to be driven by organised groups, often involving family members (Canadian Centre for Child Protection: C3P, 2017). Of the 150 international survivors of CSAM they surveyed, 74 (49%) reported organised abuse. This group experienced sexual abuse that on average started younger and lasted longer than the other respondents – 82% reported that their abuse started when they were aged four or younger, and 51% reported it lasting 16 or more years, followed by 22% reporting it lasting 11-15 years. In 82% of these cases, the primary abuser was reported to be a family member, most typically the victim's father (38%) followed by both parents (19%). Nearly a third (31%) of this group reported abuse by a person in a position of authority (of these, 35% mentioned a doctor or more; 30% teacher(s); 26% police; and 26% clergy), and 51% respondents mentioned at least one adult woman as an offender.

A subsequent American survey of CSAM survivors, whilst it did not ask about organised abuse, also found that for many the sexual abuse had started very young and involved family members (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018). The findings from these quantitative studies dovetail with what survivors of ritual abuse describe in interviews (Scott, 2001; Salter, 2013a).

16 The findings of this survey study are also reported by Schröder et al. (2018), and more is provided on its findings and methodology below.

> “I don’t know how old I was… the first time I had full sex. I must have been not long at school; I started as a three-year-old. My mum had taken me up to the bedroom in the evening and put a dress on me… Took my uniform off, put me in the bath and dressed me in this… I remember the vivid colours, it was a very deep purple smock dress which was very short, little frilly lace on it. And she’d pulled my hair up into what I call a ‘palm tree’ on the top of my head, standing up with a waterfall effect… Put a purple ribbon in my hair… Took my knickers off and put a nappy on me. Little white socks with lace on and a pair of T-bar sandals…
>
> He carried me to the other side of the room where they had cameras and spotlights, and he stood me on this platform… And like you’d pose a doll I suppose… And he said, ‘smile for me’ and I smiled, and I remember this big flash coming at me and it made me jump…
>
> He then removed my nappy and took pictures like that. He then took my dress off… this is the first time I remember having full sex. There are some photos of him giving me oral sex. Then… I was somehow on top of him so that his penis went inside me, and he had control of lifting me up and down. But the first time he went inside me the cameras didn’t go, and they must have switched the camera off, because I screamed and started to cry. I was immediately slapped and shook… and they started again. And it was the first time that they showed me being raped.
>
> Sinead quoted by Scott (2001) describing being prepared by her mother for filmed rape, and then how this was perpetrated by a friend of her father (her abuse later went on to include rituals)”

Historically, research into CSAM has often neglected the organised and intrafamilial dimensions to much of its production (Itzin, 1997; Salter & Wong, 2023), and similarly efforts to tackle children being bought and sold for rape (also known as child sex trafficking) have not always paid due regard to how much of this is driven by family members and paedophilic abuse groups (Itzin, 2001; Pacheo et al., 2023; Raphael, 2020). As noted above, this commercial sexual exploitation (pimping and the rapes that follow) is often reported by ritual abuse survivors as another horrific part of their maltreatment.

Survivors describe how these elements of their abuse involving filming and/or being sold to others often involve humiliation, shame, cruelty and sadism, and the profound degradation of being so objectified and commodified (for example, C3P, 2017; Pacheo et al., 2023; Raphael, 2020; Salter & Woodlock, submitted).

> “I was told that I needed to please each man, or I would be harmed, so rather than just dissociating as I did with my family members, I had to be aware enough to know if the client was getting what he wanted.”
>
> Joe quoted in Pacheco et al. (2023)

> “I was woozy. I had no energy left. When the buyer was penetrating me, another man was photographing me. When I saw the camera, I will filled with shame, horrendous shame. Using the camera was part of the torture. They sure were experts in creating bad feelings.”
>
> Anny quoted in Raphael (2019)

> I called one of the 'clients' my dad brought 'the strangler'. This person took a lot of enjoyment out of strangling me while he would molest me with his hands. The thrill was to see me trying to resist.
>
> Kabili quoted in Pacheco et al. (2023)

> I felt that I could not go through with it anymore; I told Mom that I was not going. She pressed me to put my coat on and get into the waiting car – I refused. She finally asked why. I told her that he had touched me inappropriately. I thought something was going to happen and this nightmare would end. But she slapped me across the face and said, 'it isn't nice to make up lies about people. He is a professional and very prominent. He is helping you, and the family. You have to do your part. If anything happened, it must have been your fault.'
>
> Lucas quoted in Pacheco et al. (2023)

Some survivors of child trafficking report witnessing children being murdered within this context; these homicide victims may be deemed 'disposable' by abusers because they were missing or unregistered children, or because their absence from daily life could be accounted for by a family narrative (Pacheo et al., 2023; Raphael, 2020; Scott, 2001). These murders are both alike and different in nature from those described by survivors occurring within a ritualistic context (discussed below).

When images are involved in sexual abuse, alongside shame and self-blame, survivors often continue to live with the ongoing trauma of people continuing to view their abuse for sexual pleasure, and related fears of being recognised or contacted (Salter & Woodlock, submitted). In the CSAM survivor survey conducted by Gewirtz-Meydan et al. (2018), 74% of survivors reported feeling ashamed, guilty or humiliated all the time, 73% always or sometimes worried that people would think they were a willing participant, and 73% always or sometimes worried that people would recognise them in public. This fear is sadly often well-founded – 30% of those surveyed by C3P (2017) reported being recognised by someone who had seen the abuse images, over 80% of whom were propositioned, revictimized or threatened by this person(s).

It is of note that what survivors of CSAM (recorded child sexual abuse) tell us about this abuse fits with both content analysis of this material and research that asks CSAM offenders about their interests. Significant proportions report interest in sadistic child abuse (including that involving bestiality) and abuse involving very young children (Gannon et al., 2023; Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen-Valkonen, 2022; Woodhams et al., 2021), and this content is widely available online for them to view (Salter & Whitten, 2022).

6. The nature and dynamics of organised ritual abuse

When organised abuse involves rituals and supernatural narratives, what do these comprise? How are the rituals consistent with victims' wider experience of abuse, and how are they set apart? What offender-victim dynamics do they involve and what offender strategies are at play? This section explores these and related questions, with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of the nature of this abuse and the psychology at play.

Rituals in the broadest sense are practices that follow a convention or habit. Often however, the term 'ritual' is used to more specifically mean what are termed in sociology 'special collective ritual events' (Knottnerus, 2014). These rituals (from here on in, how 'ritual' is used in this report) involve multiple participants engaging in activities with a distinctive form, at set times and separated from everyday social practices (Knotterus, 2014).

Examples of such rituals include religious ceremonies, political rallies, and commemorations of important historical events. They are central to the human experience and occur across history and cultures. These ritual events, entwined with the narratives that support them, have particular power and so are frequently designed and used by those with nefarious intentions to control others (see for example, Delano & Knottnerus' (2018) analysis of the Khmer Rouge's use of ritual). And this appears to be a primary purpose of the rituals and related ideologies of ritual abuse, alongside their related use as justification and inspiration for extreme cruelty.[17]

Survivors of ritual abuse generally report this abuse as being less frequent to the other forms of abuse they were experiencing – taking place as organised ceremonies; often on specific calendar dates; involving an immediate circle of abusers or larger numbers (essentially paedophile rings coming together); and comprising a series of extreme tortures and abuses that are given ideological or religious justification (for example, a family pet being 'sacrificed') (Behrendt et al., 2020; Salter, 2013a; Sarson & MacDonald, 2008; Schröder, Nick, et al., 2020; Scott, 2001).

17 There is the debate around whether this abuse is better termed 'ritual abuse' or 'ritualised abuse' – some interpret an event to be only a true 'ritual' when most participants believe in the narrative supporting it (for example, only people believing in Christianity taking communion), and so prefer the term 'ritualised', this helping to make clear that individuals may enact an abusive ceremony without any belief in its stated ideological justification (for example, they might say it is a marriage to Satan whilst all the while knowing it is just a way to terrify children). However, the definition of special collective ritual events does include this wider practice and this is right, given that the power of rituals does not depend on their leaders' beliefs. In short, I appreciate the affordances of both terms and so use them interchangeably.

6.1 Ideologies and themes

Schröder, Nick, et al. (2020) surveyed 165 adults reporting a history of organised abuse, 88% of whom named the involvement of ideology / ritual within it.[18] Of this group, 72% reported Satanic ideology, 35% racist or fascist, and 30% 'religious or free church' (this category included Christianity, Jehovah's Witnesses and Freemasonry). Smaller numbers reported Germanic, witchcraft, military or Kaballah narratives.[19] These proportions were roughly similar to those reported in a parallel survey of therapists who worked with survivors of ritual abuse, who were asked what ritual ideologies their clients disclosed (Schröder et al., 2020). In Scott's (2001) smaller survey of 36 survivors in Britain, 20 indicated that their abuse involved Satanic ideology; five named Mormonism, Roman Catholicism, Fundamentalist Christian, Masonic, neo-Nazi or Wicca (one naming two of these); and the remaining 11 were split between not knowing and being unwilling or too fearful to answer.

The ideologies perpetrators draw upon will in large part reflect their cultural backdrop – mainstream beliefs and practices provide material that is co-opted and twisted into an abusive belief system, working to add credibility and power to it.

> "I think Satan gets brought in because he's very handy for terrifying small children. If I was brought up in a Hindu country, they wouldn't use Satan, they'd use whatever their religious bad guy is."
>
> Polly quoted by Salter (2013a)

Despite the diversity of ideologies used by perpetrators, they generally appear to boil down to the same set of basic themes: there is a Manichean world view, in which the simple binaries of good and evil exist in perpetual conflict (these being defined in opposite ways from the norm); victims are evil and must make amends for this (through atonement, sacrifice, purification, punishment etc – all defined to involve abuse); and perpetrators are worthy of higher powers and have an obligation to exercise them within rituals (these being sequences of abuse) (Salter, 2012, 2013a; Scott, 2001). Strength lies in crossing moral boundaries and pushing cruelty to its limit – rituals encourage and legitimise this, providing the framework. Gender roles are salient: men are seen as the natural leaders and masculinity is bound up with the notion of strength as cruelty. Females are seen as inferior and naturally meriting subjugation by men (Sarson & Macdonald, 2008), although some women can escape this by taking on 'masculine' roles or utilizing seemingly 'feminine' qualities to further abuse in ways admired by the men (Scott, 2001; Salter, 2013a).

> "It is also a sophisticated form of mind fuck. It takes what a person knows or intuits to be good/true/real and proves them wrong. Good is bad. God is bad. Family is bad when it is good and good when it is bad and evil and abuse is love etc."
>
> Lily quoted by Salter (2019)

18 Several aspects of this study are important to note to assist its interpretation. First, as is standard in the social sciences, abuse experience is gathered by self-report – this is typically a fairly reliable method of data collection (e.g. Nooner et al., 2010) – such surveys do not appear disproportionately likely to attract deception, but of course a level of misinformation cannot be ruled out. Second, participants heard about the survey via trauma support networks or therapy and so are more likely to be receiving mental health treatment than the average survivor of organised or ritual abuse. Third, participants were eligible if they endorsed the statement 'I have had experiences of organised / ritual violence' – this effectively meant that most of the participants reported experience of organised ritual abuse, but some had experienced organised abuse without rituals; if participants named an ideological element to their abuse, they were placed in the ritual abuse group (some comparative of the two groups was conducted).

19 A number of survivors reported the involvement of more than one ideology

> [In the group] it was like everyone else – the majority of people – were 'good', it was like a good and evil comic book thing… I was the evil that the rest of the world is trying to fight.
>
> Alex quoted in Salter (2012)

These ideological tropes and their associated ritualistic practices appear to support the project of organised abuse in four key interlocking ways:

- Legitimizing sadistic cruelty
- Encouraging more extreme cruelty
- Causing victims deep distress and alienation from themselves
- Silencing victims through terror, guilt and shame

Spiritual narratives and group ceremonies enable people to feel part of something greater than themselves, and this process can assist them in shedding a sense of individual responsibility and therefore guilt – they can see their actions as part of a wider whole and ordained by the ritual ('I'm just doing what I'm supposed to be doing') (Salter, 2013a). In normative rituals the diminished sense of self (termed deindividuation) may be integral to positive states of belonging, trust and peace (Marshall, 2002), but here it is integral to furthering cruelty.

> I have often wondered why they did that [the rituals] as they didn't actually seem particularly religious at all. When I think about, I see that, psychologically, the ritualization made people feel like they didn't have to stay in their little moral boundaries – they could go across them, become capable of doing anything. Become detached from their own personalities.
>
> May quoted by Salter (2013a)

Children are predisposed to make sense of the world through the guidance of adults, and fear can further drive belief (underpinned by a precautionary adaptation, 'better safe than sorry') and so survivors describe these narratives and their associated abuses as being highly effective in shaping their sense of themselves and the world, engendering deep-seated feelings of shame, defectiveness, dirtiness, unworthiness, and terror in the process (Salter, 2012; Scott, 2001).

> What can appear to be really dorky or harmless – as a child, these things, they are connected to things that are absolutely terrifying. It might seem hammy, pretending to be vampires and witches and things, but, as a kid, you've seen them go through with it
>
> Lauren quoted by Salter (2012)

> For me my core programming[20] was that I was poisonous. That thick, black, vile, putrid poison oozed through my veins and through my spirit. Anyone who loved/cared/touched me or me them would be poisoned, polluted and die.
>
> Lily quoted by Salter (2019)

20 A term often used by survivors and therapists to describe the use of torture that appears deliberately used to shape a victim's behaviour and personality (discussed further below).

6.2 Perpetrator psychology

The question of whether perpetrators believe what they are espousing is a complex one. From survivors' narratives, it appears that whilst these narratives were purely designed to serve abusive purposes (versus the abuse being an unfortunate effect of honestly held religious beliefs),[21] perpetrators could come to believe what they were saying, in particular during the rituals themselves, in a process of wishful thinking. Drawing on wider thinking on the psychology of religion and ritual, Scott (2001) observed that several of the abusers of those she interviewed seemed to hold 'half-beliefs', those that came into being through the enactment of rituals or the presence of others.

> "The weird thing about it is that it was done for the children… but even people like my father, who knew they'd done it, also believed it was also happening… when I hear people talk about God and they say 'God works in mysterious ways' and I might say 'but you've just done that' and they'll answer 'yes, but he gave me the facility to do it'. And my parents would do the same. So even if they did it, it was because they were doing it with his knowledge."
>
> Lynn quoted by Scott (2001)

Beneath any belief or half-belief and the four core functions of ritual abuse (in short to achieve sadism and silence) is the question of why people would want to hurt children, and in such a profound way designed to shatter core parts of who they are: their selfhood, worth and hope.

> "Programming must shatter the life force of a person, their sense of volition, autonomy and self-respect. It must shatter hope. The victim must know they are absolutely nothing."
>
> Lily quoted by Salter (2019)

Various intersecting psychological factors appear to be at play here including narcissistic entitlement and the drive to prove one's worth to oneself through power over another; sadism operating as an escalating drive (Baumeister & Campbell, 1999); and the projection of unwanted toxic vulnerability onto others. Some individuals abused themselves as children appear to deal with the feelings of shame, worthlessness, dread, fear and powerlessness that this left them with by instilling them in others – in this process they momentarily satisfy their longing for power and significance, and at the same time perhaps identify with the victim, connecting with these shadowed feelings within themselves (Alford, 1997; Grand, 2002; Salter, 2019). As Alford (1997) summarises, sadism is the 'joy of having taken control of the experience of victimhood by inflicting it upon another' (p. 28).

Whilst history shows us the capacity for human cruelty is only constrained by the limits of the imagination (this existing alongside humanity's incredible capacity for goodness), our understanding of the psychology behind this cruelty has been limited by the scarcity of people who have behaved in this way speaking honestly about it, and indeed maybe few people being able to listen.

21 Misunderstanding ritual abuse as a product of religious belief (versus the other way round) appears to have contributed to its denial and disbelief – for example, people appear to have denied ritual abuse in an (unnecessary) attempt to protect pagan and occult traditions from criticism (discussed further below).

One exception to this comes in the form of Lily, a survivor of ritual abuse writing candidly to Michael Salter (2019) about the feelings held by a dissociated part of her who, for understandable reasons, stepped into a perpetrator role within the abuse to escape the horrors of victimhood:

> "I wonder too if the power that comes from being a programmer [abuser / torturer] is 1. Sexual and 2. A defence against their own powerlessness. As I read things I have written from some of my perpetrator personalities [in therapy journals] I can feel the seduction of it. It is erotic, sadistic, omnipotent. It is a surge of energy that pulsates throughout my body that is strongly sexual, and I feel indomitable and full of contempt for all who are weaker than me. Truly, I can understand why people chose to go with that energy and its illusions."
>
> Lily quoted in Salter (2019)

Survivors' accounts suggest that in many families, organised abuse is intergenerational: a minority of children of abusers going on to become abusers themselves, as well as the dissociation of some being exploited to revictimize them as adults (discussed further below) or to abuse their children (Scott, 2001; Salter, 2012; Campbell, 2023). It appears that male children are in particular taught and expected to adopt abuser roles and identities themselves.

> "I feel like I was being structured in that way [to become an abuser] but I said no. I had four older sisters and the training I got at home and something unconscious in my own life outside of... I wouldn't do it, and from that point on I was feminized, subjugated to be a woman."
>
> Sam (male) quoted in Scott (2001)

6.3 Acts of abuse and torture

What behavioural shape does this cruelty typically take? What abusive practices do these supernatural ideologies enable and these rituals comprise? In the survey of 165 survivors in Germany conducted by Schröder et al. (2020) discussed above, 96% reported that they were subjected to near-death experiences and 93% reported isolation with sensory deprivation. Similar percentages of the 174 surveyed therapists reported hearing disclosures of these forms of abuse in their work with survivors (97% and 95% respectively). And such experiences are also recounted by survivors in interviews (Scott, 2001; Salter, 2013a), heard in some court cases (for example see Lakeman, 1998; Miller, 1995; Scott, 2023), and documented in clinical case and helpline reports (Sarson & Macdonald, 2008; Scott, 1993). In their review of 37 patients with dissociative disorders who reported ritual abuse, Young et al. (1991) found that all of them reported near death experiences as part of the abuse, and 27 disclosed that they had been buried alive in coffins or graves.

> "If you want to take a person to death and back again, all you need is a bit of gaffer tape. Y'know. Wrap around their hands, put it over their mouth, two fingers over the nose, that's as scary as it gets. And afterwards, there isn't a mark on their body. There is nothing to say that anything happened. That's how vulnerable human beings are."
>
> Darren quoted in Salter (2013a)

Also frequently mentioned by survivors is the use of bodily substances: faeces, urine, and blood including menstrual fluid (Coleman, 1994; Sarson & Macdonald, 2008; Salter, 2012, 2013a; Scott, 1993, 2001) – these appear a potent tool to achieve sadistic ends through their ability to evoke deep feelings of disgust and contamination. Survivors, for example, report being smeared with faeces and urinated on during 'ceremonies' and being forced to ingest them. In his child protection file review, Gallagher (2001) found that some children, who were reported as victims of ritual abuse and now in foster care, held a preoccupation with urine and faeces – one child for example ate her own faeces alongside that of the foster parent's baby and cat. The use of these potent substances works to entrench the messages from the abusers – through the disgust and shame evoked, children come to feel more deeply that they are the dirty and worthless beings that the abusers, with the help of the religious narratives, have told them they are (Salter, 2012).

Relatedly, people frequently report the involvement of animals – children (and adults) may be forced into sexual activity with them and these animals may be tortured or indeed killed as a purported sacrifice (Behrendt et al., 2020; Creighton, 1993: Salter, 2013a; Sarson & MacDonald, 2008; Scott, 1993, 2001). All 37 patients in Young et al.'s (1991) case series reported witnessing animal mutilations or killings. Animals and children (and at times adults) are abused within the one act, in that the abuse of animals is typically a form of torture for the child – especially if the animal in question has been a pet.

> "They would force – they did it to me – your face onto the genitals of the black dog. And then they tried to make you eat the faeces of the dog. And when they killed the chicken, they tried to get you – they would put it into the bowl, and they'd push your face towards it – and they tried to make you drink it."
>
> Kate quoted in Salter (2012)

> "The animal [goat] was opened right down the middle and then opened up. That's when you really know it, it smells high as a kite, a horrible smell… I was then made to lay in the carcass of the body… [she then describes abusers later putting her through a fake operation] they told me that were taking out a bit of the goat's intestine that had accidentally got in when the devil had gone in. Now I know that's impossible and they just had some intestines there. But at six! And they said they had to remove some of my intestines too so the devil had a bit more room in there. You believe those things, I don't think you have a choice. How would you know they weren't true anyway? But they put a lot of effort into convincing you… now as a teenager I saw that happen so many times to other people so I knew, but even then if you'd tried telling me looking back on my own that it wasn't any different, I wouldn't have believed you. I'd have thought 'mine was different, mine was real' and 'they're doing this to confuse me'."
>
> Lynn quoted in Scott (2001)

Central to ritual abuse is the repurposing of components and themes within mainstream religions for abusive ends, for example, the ceremony of marriage, the idea of sacrifice, and a hierarchy of spiritual roles (such as high priest and priestess) (Behrendt et al., 2020; Salter, 2012, 2013a; Sarson & MacDonald, 2008; Scott, 2001; Young et al., 1991). The power and utility of these tropes within ritual abuse seems to lie in large part in their wider cultural relevance and cachet.

Killings (real or apparent) of animals or humans (see below) are inspired, legitimised and encouraged through rendering them as sacrifices. And children are further entrapped and conscripted into the deceptions of the abuse through ceremonies that apparently marry them to Satan, God or other deity, or ordain them within the abuse hierarchy. At times these are narrated in ways which seem to give victims kudos (which is then used against them) or may simply emphasise their inherent badness. In Young et al.'s (1991) sample of 37 dissociative patients reporting ritual abuse, 30 described this involving a marriage to Satan. Victims describe these rituals leaving them feeling that they are one of the abusers and are bound to the group (Salter, 2013a; Scott, 2001). A keen appreciation of the power that spiritual rituals and cultural rites have worldwide on human psychology, behaviour and social organisation (Knottnerus, 2014) is crucial in understanding their use and impact here. In all of this, costumes, cloaks and other paraphernalia, alongside chanting, signs and symbols are often used to powerful effect (Behrendt et al., 2020; Creighton, 1993; Scott, 2001; Salter, 2013a).

> "They were getting me to be some kind of 'high priestess' and all this kind of stuff. They tortured me and conditioned me, and then I end up being used. Yes, it's a position of power over men and boys, but I'm used to recruit the young boys through… through sex. Then of course, it's pretty horrible because I'm being tortured, but I end up, I really want to be involved… they do it from torturing you first, they give you a position of power after they have conditioned you to be what they want you to be. Basically so you've got really nowhere else to go."
>
> Jo quoted in Salter (2012)

6.4 Coercion, manipulation and moral injury

Perpetrators are often reported to use various strategies to coerce and manipulate victims into enacting harm on others (Behrendt et al., 2020; Salter 2013a; 2013b; Sarson & Macdonald, 2008; Scott, 2001; Young et al., 1991). This works both to silence victims, as they believe that what they have 'done' means that they too are abusers and would be prosecuted if they told, and achieves sadistic ends – it is perhaps the ultimate cruelty and most intrusive violation to coerce someone into doing things that are against their 'moral core', so that they are holding the distress, guilt and shame that actually belongs with the instigators.

This coercion can take several forms. As Jo, the survivor quoted by Salter (2012) above, describes, it can involve abusers teaching a child (or a dissociated part of a child; see below) that they have a certain role or identity that requires them to harm others. This role is imbued with status, and they may well be told that if they take it on, they or others that they care about will escape the worst abuses themselves.

In related situations, children may be placed in very explicit false choice situations, for example told that they must hurt another child or that this child will be harmed more severely – there is of course no true choice here, because there are no options that align with their desire that no-one is hurt. However, this set-up leaves victims profoundly feeling that they have chosen harm, with all the guilt and shame that this evokes. In such situations, the instigators have abused both children and have perpetrated the additional torture of moral injury on the child placed in the false choice.

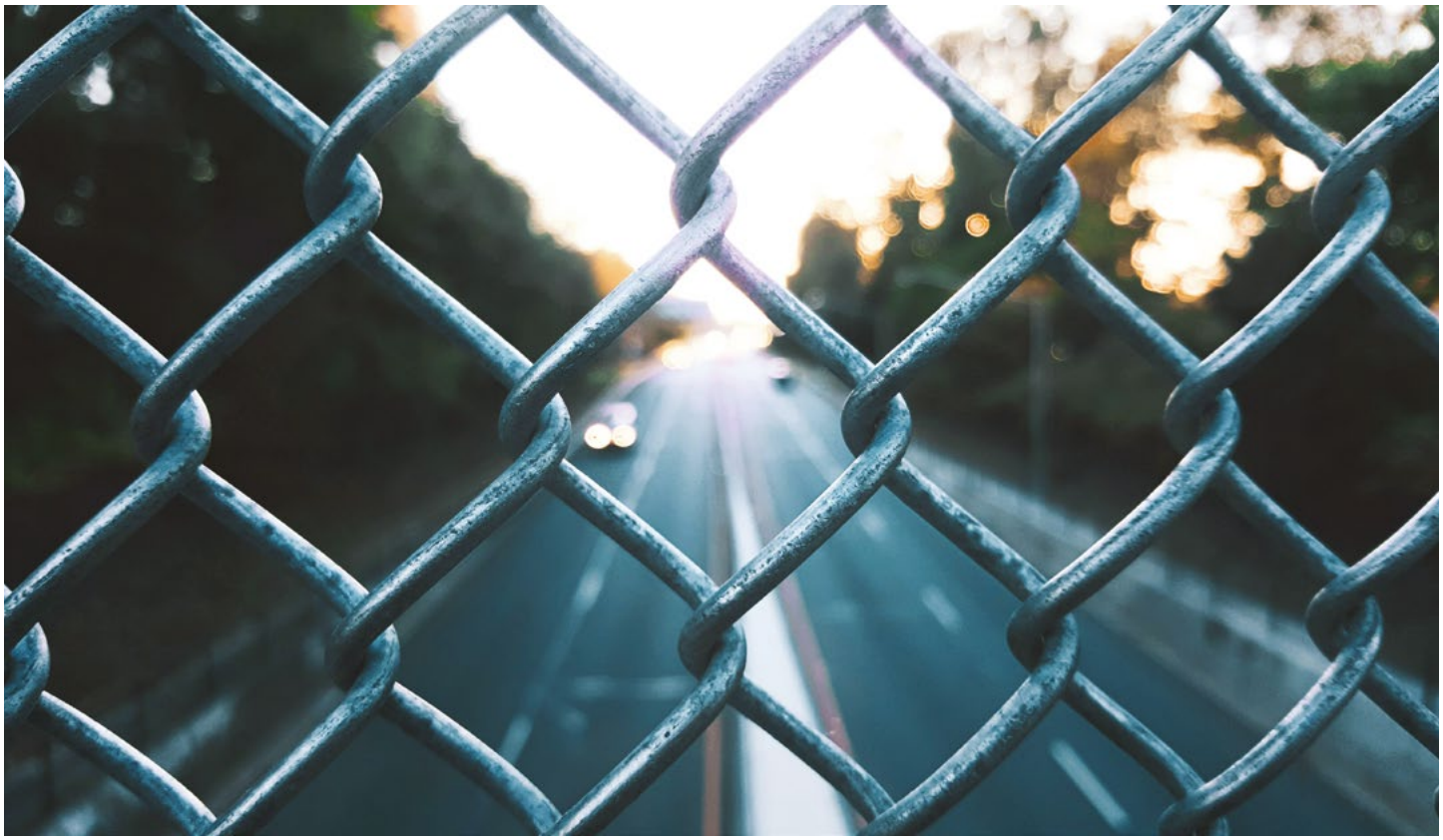
> "I remember once, I was made to hold a knife while an adult held a baby. And, to me, it was a feeling that they were trying to make me feel guilty, so that I would never speak… they try and make you feel involved, make you feel like you are in it… that was one of the most traumatic times."
>
> Anne quoted in Salter (2013a)

> I always felt like it was happening to me, because I could always see the pain on her face, but she wouldn't show it. She would always wink at me or smile, when I knew she was hurting, and it was me that was hurting her. It was a case of 'if you don't it we'll do it, but we'll kill her afterwards', and 'if you really love her, you'll hurt her'
>
> Sinead quoted in Scott (2001)

In other situations, a victim may experience such severe horrors that they reach a limit, beyond which they move to take on a perpetrating role in the hope that this ensures their survival or provides some relief from further overwhelming powerlessness, terror, degradation and loss. One of the survivors who spoke to Salter (2013a) described reaching this point after her second pregnancy was violently terminated, breaking a promise from her father that she would be able keep this baby:

> That was the point, I think, where I really just gave in. And that was really the point where I moved into being a perpetrator. Because of the despair. It was like there was no point anymore. And the hope that, as a perpetrator, you'll get treated better.
>
> Lily quoted in Salter (2013a, p.167-8)

Abusers are frequently reported to have made recordings of victims engaged in forced harm and moral injury situations, which are then used to threaten and blackmail (along the lines of 'if you tell, we'll show this video'). In Schröder, Nick et al.'s (2020) survey, 78% of the 165 individuals reporting organised abuse (often involving ritual) said that they had been extorted through recordings of forced violence against others.



6.5 Induced confusion and dissociation

Drugs are a further tool that survivors describe their abusers using to control and silence them (Behrendt et al., 2020; Salter 2013a). Their use might lead children to being wholly or semi-unconscious during some incidents of abuse, meaning that they do not hold explicit memories of them. In other circumstances, the impact of drugs interacts with other ploys, such as blindfolds, deception, and the use of mid night-time hours, to induce fogginess and confusion. Individuals may be left forever uncertain of what exactly happened. Nearly all of Young et al.'s (1991) patients reporting ritual abuse (36 of 37) disclosed forced drug usage as part of this abuse.

> "My mum would say, 'kiddies, I've made you all a hot chocolate'... they would always bring out a particular cup and make sure they gave it to me... I don't know if the cinnamon was about disguising the taste, or if it was meant to be a trigger or something. But it was primary school, and that would happen, and then I'd get all the symptoms – I realise now of being drugged."
>
> Sky quoted in Salter (2013a, p. 123)

> "We are coming home, and my father saying, 'you know that I love you. It didn't happen. You don't remember. You know that I love you. It didn't happen. You don't remember.' And it's like... um, and it still just completely fogs my head."
>
> Lily quoted in Salter (2013a, p. 124)

Many survivors also report the use of torture and psychological conditioning to induce dissociative self-states in which they may be particularly malleable to abusers' bidding (Schröder et al., 2020). Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID; previously termed 'Multiple Personality Disorder'), discussed below in the section on impact, is in short a common adaptation to organised abuse in which the child develops different parts of themselves (effectively different selves)[22] who hold different parts of the trauma, enabling other part(s) to function effectively in day-to-day life (Dorahy et al., 2014; Nijenhuis et al., 2010; Sar, Dorahy & Krüger, 2017). In chronic abuse situations, it makes sense for offenders to be highly attuned to their victims' psychology, including any dissociative tendencies, and use this to their advantage. When a child has DID, torturers may trigger out a particular self-state or induce a new one who is disconnected from aspects of the child (for example certain emotions, memories and identities) that might otherwise lead to push-back against abusers' directives, or an inability to cope with them. Eighty per cent of the 165 survivors surveyed by Schröder et al. (2020) reported that their abuse had included these 'dissociative split strategies' (These and related psychological conditioning techniques are termed by some 'mind control').[23] Abusers may also lead some dissociative selves to believe one ideology whilst teaching others another (say one part being taught to revere Satan and another God) contributing to confusion and division within.

22 'Parts', 'selves' and 'self-states' are used interchangeably in this report to describe what in the language of Multiple Personality Disorder were termed personalities.

23 Whilst this term captures the perpetrators' attempt to shape their victims' minds to their own ends, in my view it might have some limitations – the first being that this is simply one of many abusive strategies that aim to control how victims think, feel and behave (including for example verbal denigration). Secondly, the term 'mind control' has sci-fi connotations (contributing to positions of default disbelief, discussed below), and relatedly, may collude with perpetrators' own narratives of their omnipotence and omniscience. I am not aware of any abuse technique that achieves complete mind control of a victim. So in sum, the term could inadvertently exaggerate the control exerted in this abuse, whilst demoting that inherent within other forms.

> I was switching [from one part to another] within the group – ok – which I didn't know I was doing at the time but I know now… it's a part of my mind that I open up that's never been opened before, therefore it doesn't know anything about life. I would open that part of my mind and I would explain what was about to happen. I would fast forward what was going to happen and the fact this person had to stand there, had to take a knife, had to cut, had to gut and how to do it. I would then completely switch myself off and let this part of my mind take over… that's how I see it anyway, that's how mine worked.
>
> Sinead quoted in Scott (2001)

Pseudo-medical procedures may be used in this and other aspects of the abuse. Nine of the 16 survivors interviewed by Salter (2013a) reported this medicalised abuse, with a number disclosing the use of hypnosis and electric shocks within it (also see Behrendt et al., 2020). These were often seemingly employed to help create or shape dissociative states in order to further perpetrators' control and the obedience and compliance of their victims. On the basis of his interviewees' accounts, Salter (2013a) surmises that 'ritualistic abuse and "mind control" are two sides of the same coin – practices that employ different ideologies (one religious, the other scientific) to mystify the relations of domination in abusive groups and make the abuse appear both inescapable and inevitable'.

6.6 Homicide

> And people say 'Oh, how can people be killed and not be found?' Now I hate to say it, but there's a lot of missing people. And they stay missing. And it didn't happen all the time. It didn't happen on a regular basis. But it did happen.
>
> Rhea quoted in Salter (2013a)

Possibly the most contentious aspect of ritual abuse disclosures are the reports of homicides. Many survivors report that people were killed within rituals or the wider abuse, either by 'accident' or as part of a plan. Regarding those that were incidental, some survivors interviewed by Scott (2001) and Salter (2013a) described witnessing perpetrators taking abuse to such an extreme that victims died from their injuries, sometimes much to their abusers' frustration.

> On one of these occasions, there was a young girl, only about three years old, that had been raped. And she actually died there. And one of her abusers looked and said, 'what a waste of fuck. Fucking little shit just died on me.' And another man came over, and said, 'can I have my turn now?' And the other guy is still going aggro that she'd died. And he's saying 'fucking little bitch, she's dead'. And the other guy just looked and said, 'well she's still warm, she's still fuckable.'
>
> Neil quoted in Salter (2013a)

In other situations, deaths are planned, sometimes as punishments of child or adult victims who have apparently tried to report the abuse; this also works to eliminate the threat they pose and serves as a warning to others of what would happen if they sought help. This account from a survivor of wider organised abuse details one such death, and the perpetrators use of moral injury within it, that left her deeply wounded with a sense of complicity:

> “The men indicated that the girl had tried to tell the police about the house. They were talking a lot about not telling. They had a probe, a metal pipe or bar, about three foot long. She was forced to stand in the middle of the rug and was hit on the legs, arms, body, she was screaming, it was bloody. They want you to know this is what is going to happen to you if you tell anyone. I’m ashamed to say this. They forced us to hit this girl, to hold the prod. They leaned over; their hand was on your hand. You’re hitting her, you’re a murderer too. Now you did this too.”
>
> Anny, written account quoted in Raphael (2019)

Within rituals, homicides tend to be narrated as sacrifices (that may also be serving as punishments) and such deaths might then be followed by commands to ingest the victim’s blood and body parts (Behrendt et al., 2020), in line with the use of bodily substances to fulfil sadistic desires, discussed above.

> “It’s taboos. What you are not allowed to do is the greatest thrill. Y’know, crossing the gender line is one thrill, and crossing the age line is another thrill, and crossing the pain line, and y’know – what can you do that is more horrible and nasty and taboo than killing a child? Well, I’ll give you an answer. You eat it. So they did that. They were always looking for the next thing… you see other people have a sexual lust, but these people, they thirst for pain. Their want to degrade, it builds up.”
>
> Darren quoted in Salter (2013a)

Thirty-one of Young et al.'s (1991) clinical sample reported witnessing and forced 'participation' in adult and infant 'sacrifice'. Some remembered incidents might not be true homicides as tricks may be played – for example some survivors report as older children being forced to deceive younger children by swapping dolls for real infants (Young et al., 1991). However other reports are not explicable as the product of such deceptions. The victims of these ritualistic murders include children of abusers; babies conceived from abuse who have been induced by perpetrators before term; and homeless individuals brought into the abuse for 'sport'.

> "It's so easy for them, the actual killing of infants, they would just get one of these addicted women, remove her from society – and when that child is born, there is nothing, no records, nothing to ever say that child has been born. And so they can do what they like."
>
> Darren quoted in Salter (2013a)

> "There was a tramp that they brought in. He was very drunk, he was laughing and everything, and everyone else seemed to be laughing as well. I was even laughing 'cos it seemed quite a jolly thing. I didn't know what was going to happen and er... they laid him out on the table... they cut him from his stomach, just sliced him right open. He was screaming for so long, it seemed like he was screaming even when he was all open up... we were made to watch [a film made of this]. And they seemed to zoom in on his face a lot, which... was... horrible. I still wake up, just seeing his face. I don't remember, like in the dreams, anything else apart from his face."
>
> Debbie quoted in Scott (2001)

All such experiences are intensely traumatic for victims and survivors, yet their levels of anguish reach new heights when the person killed is someone dear to them. Survivors often struggled to talk about such deaths, which often appeared to be the trigger for them to attempt escape or resist in another form, as they found themselves in a place where there was nothing left to lose (Salter, 2013a; Scott, 2001). For a number, these deaths are of their own babies, abusively induced before term:

> "I'm really quite together til we get to this bit and then I lose it... when I go to talk about it all I can see is her. It's because I was standing in front of her and I couldn't do anything about it, and she was alive one minute and then she was dead. I saw her alive and I couldn't stop her becoming dead. There just wasn't anything I could do... and they disembowelled her. I suppose that's the way it's put. And I had to eat that [unclear]... You know, my sister got married a couple of years ago and my parents put a family notice in the newspaper and Mum put everybody's degrees in and stuff. And I knew everyone in the family would get a copy of it, so I put an 'In Memoriam' in the same day for my daughter. And I thought they won't know it, but everyone who keeps that is going to have the truth."
>
> Kathleen quoted in Scott (2001)

So if we are to take seriously multiple accounts of ritual abuse, this means taking seriously the prospect of multiple undetected homicides – and this many baulk at. There is a feeling that orchestrated sadistic murders cannot happen in contemporary, civilised society (Scott, 2001), bar the few exceptions that are impossible to deny, and these are assumed to have been destined to come to light (for example, Joseph Fritzl or Fred and Rosemary West). Yet analysis of such cases only renders the prospect more plausible (Kelly, 1998).

The Wests' killing of twelve girls and women[24] (two of whom were pregnant) was only revealed after children of theirs, from the safety of care, repeatedly talked about their half-sister Heather being 'under the patio' and this finally led to the patio in question being excavated in 1994, which in turn led to a sequence of discoveries and confessions (Gloucestershire Police, n.d.). Notably six of the twelve had never been reported missing to the police (including the Wests' 8-year-old daughter, and Fred West's daughter and ex-wife), so their disappearances had never been investigated (Gloucestershire Police, n.d.). These homicides went undetected for many years and it is plausible that they would have remained so if the Wests had operated with more strategy, keeping their child within their care and using greater intimidation to silence them more effectively.

In the United States, Samuel Little, whilst serving life for the murders of three women (only discovered via DNA that was gathered as part of an unrelated drugs investigation), chose to confess in 2018 to a further 90 murders, mostly of women of colour who were in prostitution, drug addicted and/or homeless. The FBI deemed these confessions credible and 60 were formally connected to him by the police. Had Little not chosen to disclose these murders, they would have remained unknown.

Systems for detecting homicides largely depend on family members reporting a victim's disappearance and this being robustly investigated. But such reports are unlikely to be made if family members are themselves responsible, or complicit or unaware – instead they might offer plausible explanations to any informal inquiries (such as a child moving to live with relatives). This weakness in the system has been starkly demonstrated with two cases reported in the past year, each in which a child was killed but their death was not recorded or investigated until it happened to come to light much later (and not it seems via the system's default processes).[25]

Equally when people on the margins of society go missing, their disappearance is often not reported or investigated, their absence judged as simply a reflection of a chaotic or itinerant lifestyle. Indeed, their disappearance may not even be noticed; this also being the case with children who are not registered (including those conceived within abuse and killed soon after birth).

In recent years, the existence of hidden homicides caused by domestic abuse has been widely acknowledged in the media,[26] driven in large part by the pioneering work of Jane Monckton Smith, a former police officer whose concerns about domestic abuse and its investigation led her into academia.[27] Headway has been made in detecting these crimes through adopting a willingness to explore the worst case scenario – to see it as possible, perhaps best summed up in the poet Ralph Hodgson's remark that 'some things have to be believed to be seen'. This stance is not yet routinely applied to situations in which homicides linked to organised abuse may be hidden.

24 Fred West was charged with 12 murders, but committed suicide before his trial. Rosemary West was convicted of 10 murders.
25 See reports: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/22/irish-pm-says-case-of-boy-whose-disappearance-went-unnoticed-is-disturbing?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cew298qg8lxo
26 See for example, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/mar/04/hidden-homicides-campaign-calls-for-review-of-cases-where-women-fell-from-height
27 https://daily.jstor.org/ending-myths-domestic-homicide/

7. Prevalence

There has been a paucity of research looking at the extent of organised child abuse, and ritual abuse in particular, which together with the complexities of this crime and its impact,[28] make it hard to form a clear picture of prevalence. Nonetheless, various studies and sources of data are insightful – they converge to suggest that these are not common forms of abuse, and neither are they vanishingly rare.

In a recent study in Germany (Gerke et al., 2024), 0.5% of a sample of 2515 individuals representative of the wider population said that they had experienced organised sexual and/or ritual violence in their childhood, with 1.8% stating that they cannot or do not want to answer the question (13 and 46 individuals respectively). Fewer individuals reported organised sexual or ritual abuse in answer to a different set of questions about it (here there was no opt out option), and the two groups appeared to overlap little, making it hard to draw definitive conclusions.[29] However, all prevalence figures from this study, when extrapolated to the population of Germany, indicate thousands of victims of organised child abuse, both with and without a ritual dimension.

Numerous sexual violence support services report that a significant minority of those that they help disclose a history or ongoing experience of ritual abuse (see Salter (2008) for a summary of some of this data). For example, a study surveying workers at the Center against Sexual Assault in Melbourne, Australia (Schmuttermaier & Veto, 1999) found that 28% had supported one or more ritual abuse survivors, and that there had been 153 ritual abuse cases in total over a ten year period. And between December 2006 and March 2024, the NAPAC helpline received 1,252 calls in which ritual abuse was mentioned, equating to almost 2.5% of all calls.

28 For example, as discussed below, many victims of organised abuse experience periods of their life in which the abuse is not remembered and therefore cannot be reported. In Schröder et al.'s (2018) sample of 165 survivors of organised ritual abuse, 29 was the average age survivors reported becoming aware of the abuse.

29 There are several aspects of the research design which may have worked against some victims and survivors disclosing; for example, participants completed questionnaires with a researcher present (and this may have been in their own homes) and this may have heightened fears around confidentiality. In addition, some of the questions were not straightforward – for example, a key question about ritual abuse asked about whether 'an ideology was used to provide a rationale or justification for the violence' and 'ideology' (whilst an accurate term) may not be widely understood.

Similarly, it is not uncommon for therapists to come across victims and survivors of ritual abuse in the course of their work. In a survey of 2,709 psychologists in the United States, 13% reported having worked with one or more survivors of ritual abuse within the past decade (Bottoms, Shaver & Goodman, 1996). A similar survey of 222 British Clinical Psychologists and Hypnotherapists found that 38% of the Psychologists and 25% of the Hypnotherapists had supported at least ritual abuse survivor (Ost et al., 2013). This study also found that these professionals differed in the degree to which they believed reports of ritual abuse, with more belief held by those who had supported survivors than those who had not.

Turning to studies of police and child protection cases, in a 1990s survey of all police forces, social services departments and NSPCC child protection teams conducted by Gallagher et al. (1996), respondents reported 211 cases of organised sexual abuse over the past four years, 62 of which they classed as ritual.[30] The researchers followed this up with a review of police and social services case records in eight local areas (together broadly representative of the nation) and in this analysis found a higher percentage of organised abuse cases than reported in the survey, but a similar percentage of ritual abuse cases[31] – it appeared that many cases that were organised abuse were not being recognised as such by the survey respondents. Family members and relatives were involved in almost two thirds of organised abuse cases, and at least one perpetrator in all of the six ritual cases was a family member.

The scarcity of prevalence studies of organised abuse, especially that which involves ritual, commercial or intrafamilial dimensions, appears to be a result of the disavowal of these forms of abuse that was generated by 'witch-hunt', 'moral panic' and 'false memory' narratives in the 1990s and that has remained in place ever since (see section below on the discourse of disbelief). This disavowal has also led to fewer victims and survivors feeling confident enough to disclose it (see section on disclosure). Regularly gathered data from a variety of sources is required to map trends over time and delineate to whom ritual and other forms of organised abuse are being disclosed to and to whom they are not – all with the aim of improving our understanding and responses to these otherwise highly shadowed forms of abuse.

30 It is not clear if there could have been duplication here, with the three sectors at times reporting the same case.
31 They found 74 cases of organised abuse, 6 of which were ritual abuse. If the figure of 74 was extrapolated to the whole population, this would have resulted in 1,111 cases over the four-year period the survey covered, versus the 211 reported.

8. Longer term impacts on victims and survivors

As is clear, organised and ritual abuse involves its victims being regularly subjected to levels of sadistic treatment that are completely outside the realms of normal human experience. Single incidents of this abuse would easily be enough to floor a person, yet victims, often from very young ages, are forced to endure this treatment for years on end. Doing justice to the impact of this requires its own report; here just some key themes are summarised.[32]

Firstly, there are the intense and overwhelming emotions. As discussed, victims experience extreme levels of terror, betrayal, humiliation, anxiety, shame (and more) during and surrounding the abuse and, consistent with psychological theories of trauma (for example, Brewin, 2003), these emotions and the experiences they connect to continue to loom large in their lives beyond (Salter, 2013b). Schröder et al. (2018) in their online survey of 165 organised and/or ritual abuse survivors found that 76% reported symptoms indicative of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and 74% reported that they had been formally diagnosed with this. And all 37 patients reporting ritual abuse in Young et al.'s (1991) study had been diagnosed with severe PTSD. This is a disorder involving recurrent traumatic intrusions such as nightmares and flashbacks. The latter can range from fragmentary sensations from the trauma (such as a sudden smell or taste) to full-blown episodes in which a person feels like they are back in the abuse, experiencing it all over again. Pervasive anxiety and phobias are also common (Coleman, 1994; Schröder et al., 2018; Young et al., 1991).

Less easy to capture in diagnoses are the profound and disabling feelings of shame, worthlessness, guilt, and 'badness' that survivors describe carrying around in their core (frequently discussed in the clinical treatment literature, see for example, Schwartz, 2013). These are a natural consequence of the abusers using multiple methods, as noted, to inscribe into victims a profound sense that they are evil and worthless, and such feelings are understandably very difficult to rid oneself of. They may then be expressed in behaviour such as self-harm and suicidality (Coleman, 1994; Schröder, Behrendt et al., 2020a; Young et al., 1991).

> "Other things have been more and more my life [but]... I still feel like, you still feel like it's this core, but I do kind of feel like the other stuff is slowly filling it all in, but I'm still trying to get rid of this bit in the middle."
>
> Jo quoted in Salter (2012)

32 Here I centre research specifically focussed on organised and ritual abuse survivors but given the small number of studies and their unavoidable limitations (for example, reliance on clinical samples), it is important to also place these findings within the wider research literature on the impact of childhood abuse. In regard to sexual abuse, numerous studies indicate that this risks a wide range of significant harms across the life course (Maniglio, 2009). Studies using methodologies that can control for the influence of co-existing adversities and that follow victims over time indicate that it often negatively impacts upon individuals in child and adulthood, and that subsequent difficulties are not explicable as simply the impact of frequently co-occurring adverse life experiences. Such studies reveal that sexual abuse increases the risk of individuals (in later adolescence and/or adulthood) experiencing: anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress symptoms, low self-esteem, dissociation, self-harm, suicidal behaviour, relationship difficulties (such as break-ups, dissatisfaction and avoidance), sexual difficulties (such as sexual aversion or ambivalence), alcohol and drug dependence, academic difficulties and school drop-out, cognitive deficits, obesity, physical health problems and major illness, revictimization, unemployment, financial instability and reduced income, and lower life satisfaction (for example, Assini-Meytin et al., 2022; Colman & Widom, 2004; Fergusson, Boden & Horwood, 2008; Fergusson, McLeod & Horwood, 2013; Kendler et al., 2000; Papalia, Mann & Ogloff, 2021; Rapsey et al., 2019; Trickett, Noll & Putnam, 2011; Yates, Carlson & Egeland, 2008).

Trapped in these terrifying and degrading lives, it would seem impossible for children to survive without finding ways of shutting off from this reality. Indeed, if children are connected to the force of their terror, betrayal and pain, their expression of this would put them in further danger – abusers demand (explicitly or implicitly) that they tolerate abuse, and function effectively day-to-day so as to not raise suspicion. Furthermore, children must find a way to navigate the impossible situation that their greatest source of danger is also their greatest hope of protection. As Herman (1992) sums up, 'in repeated trauma, the child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with the formidable task of adaptation: she must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifying and unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness'.

This brings us to our second theme: dissociation, and related adaptations to the abuse. Dissociation is an umbrella term to describe the various ways a person may 'cut off' from their trauma. For example, people may dissociate from their reality and sense of self during the abuse (for example, find that they are watching themselves from above) and this may leave them with feelings of depersonalisation (disconnect from self) or derealization (disconnect from one's environment). They may switch off from their emotions (numbness), their memories (dissociative amnesia) or their understanding of the nature of the abuse – not seeing its violation and betrayal (enabling trauma bonding and loyalty to perpetrators) (Gagnon et al., 2017). And, as discussed, they may develop different selves (also termed parts or self-states), some who hold different elements of the trauma and others who may have little or no awareness of it (Dissociative Identity Disorder: DID).

Research finds that dissociation is a common consequence of chronic childhood trauma, with the most extreme forms, such as DID, following the most severe maltreatment (Daniels et al., 2024; Kate et al., 2021; Quiñones, 2023).[33] Indeed DID is a form of dissociation that only appears possible to develop in response to early childhood trauma, its development thought to depend upon a not yet fully formed and unified self (Dorahy et al., 2014; Şar et al., 2017). Once in play however, new parts can develop in response to new traumas across the life course. An adult with DID has an adult part or parts, alongside one or more child parts. Parts each hold different memories as their own (that may overlap) and have their own (although sometimes shared) consciousness.

Different DID self-states appear to have markedly different neurological and physiological profiles from one another (as measured for example by brain scans, heart rate, blood pressure, skin conductance and respiration) corresponding to whether they hold trauma or not, and the neurophysiology of DID individuals differs from those without it (Lebois et al., 2023; Reinders et al., 2003; 2006; 2014; 2019). Differences between self-states have not been possible to replicate by people simulating the disorder (Brand, et al., 2016; Reinders et al., 2012; 2016).

As predicted by this wider picture, research and clinical practice indicate that DID and other forms of dissociation are common consequences of organised and/or ritual abuse (Coleman, 1994; Leavitt, 1994; Schröder et al., 2018; Schröder, Behrendt et al., 2020; Young et al., 1991). In Schröder et al.'s (2018) study, 84% of their sample of organised and/or ritual abuse survivors reported a current or past diagnosis of DID, and DID was more likely to be reported by those whose abuse included a ritual (as well as organised) dimension. This is consistent with this abuse at times involving perpetrators using the aforementioned 'dissociative split strategies' in which they attempt to manipulate a victim's DID to their own ends (as noted, reported by 64% of Schröder et al.'s (2018) overall sample).

Dissociative amnesia is also common following organised and/or ritual abuse and often goes hand-in-hand with DID, as the part(s) of the person who are generally navigating life may not be aware for a long period of other self-states holding the trauma memories. Schröder et al. (2018) found the average age that survivors reported becoming aware of this abuse was 29 years old. This awareness came about through sudden flashbacks (reported by 76%) and/or situations triggering memories (reported by 66%). Similarly, Salter (2013b) observed that the survivors he interviewed 'suffered from extensive amnesia for previous experiences, as well as periods in which they were disabled by the uncontrollable intrusions of recollections of violence and abuse'. He cites one of his interviewees, Renee, recounting the moment of emergent awareness:

> "I blocked out my memories, and didn't remember until I was twenty-seven. I had a breakdown, I guess. All of a sudden, one night, I was going over my life: "oh yeah, when we were six we lived in this town, and then we moved and we lived with Nanna and Pa and then we moved in with Mark [stepfather]" – and then, just, my heart's pounding, I felt sick, and these flashes of people, and – at the time I was seeing a counsellor and I rang her that day. And it wasn't long after that I left the job that I'd been in for ten years, I just – fell to pieces."

Returning to the contradiction at the heart of this abuse, children must do their best to find protection and care from the person(s) who is treating them as a thing of no value, someone to be violated, damaged, even destroyed.

33 DID can therefore be seen as an indication that someone has been subjected to crimes in their childhood – it can support the credibility of accounts of childhood abuse, to act as a broad form of corroboration. Considering the evidence of a crime in a person's body and psychology is related to the approach of Forensic Architecture (Bois et al., 2016), which takes a similar approach to the built environment.

For many victims, especially those for whom their perpetrators are family members, this will involve developing a loyalty to the abusers, also known as a trauma bond (Bilali & Reid, 2024; McMaugh et al., 2024a; Middleton, 2013a; Schwartz, 2013). Feelings of loyalty, liking and love towards the perpetrator are made easier when the nature of the abuse is minimised through dissociation or reframing (for example, stances of 'it's not really that bad'; 'it happens to everyone'; 'I deserve it'). These feelings of loyalty in turn motivate compliant and pleasant behaviour towards the perpetrators which may increase the chances of better treatment and survival. Note that such feelings co-exist with those that are negative (such as fear, hatred or anger towards one's abusers), and so survivors are often left grappling with deep ambivalence.

Finally, the third set of impacts highlighted here are the knock-on effects of the earlier two: there are many difficult consequences to living life managing all these intrusions, profoundly aversive feelings, and forms of dissociation.[34] Survivors may, for example, turn to addictions to cope: 25% of Schröder et al.'s (2018) sample reported that they had an addiction diagnosis, and 23 of the 37 patients reviewed by Young et al. (1991) were noted to abuse substances. Many also develop depression or eating disorders (Schröder et al., 2018). Long-term relationships can be difficult to sustain (placing out of reach something so often central to healing), and so too can employment (Salter, 2013b; Schröder et al., 2018). Less tangible but arguably even more fundamental can be the impact of dissociation on survivors' sense of self and continuity.

> "When that man was abusing me, I used to go to my bed at night. Do you know what I used to do? I used to cry and I used to say, 'me, me, me.' Every now and again when I'm self-soothing, I say the same thing, 'me'. Because I lost my whole self."
>
> Colleen quoted by Salter (2013a)

> "You are so splintered, and so divided, that you have no particular strength left in your compartments – no compartment is particularly big or strong."
>
> Darren quoted by Salter (2013a)

Alongside this picture, it is important to note the ways in which dissociation plays into resilience (for example, it can enable people to work, relate, and regulate in ways which would otherwise be impossible), and the potential for survivors, especially with the support of others, to journey forward with healing and even posttraumatic growth (Brand et al., 2013).[35] Survivors report many things that help them both manage and grow, including therapy, friendships, peer support with other survivors, creative activities (art, music, writing), animals and nature (Kraus et al., 2020).

> "It's such a positive sense of survival and the beautiful, creative thing our brains can do to keep us alive, and I would not have got through school and you know, raised my kids the way I did and done the things I've done without it. I honestly think I would have self-destructed and died."
>
> Individual with DID quoted by McRae et al. (2017)

34 Just a few examples of these knock-on effects are noted here.

35 A both/and approach is critical here: both people can heal and grow following severe trauma and this in no way lessens the wrong of what was done to them. Furthermore, posttraumatic growth is not instead of (or inversely related to) abuse-related harms – in fact often the two go hand-in-hand. The complexities and potential of posttraumatic growth I discuss in more depth in an episode of Mark O'Sullivan's 'Making Lemonade' podcast, series one.

9. Ongoing abuse into adulthood

Given all that this report has covered so far, it may come as no surprise that the dynamics and impact of this childhood abuse leave victims vulnerable to further abuse by both the same perpetrators as well as others in adulthood. The former includes the risk of an ongoing abusive relationship with one's primary perpetrator (typically fathers continuing to abuse their daughters) as well as abuse from those in the wider network.

Middleton (2013a; 2013b; 2015) has explored the issue of parents sexually abusing their children into adulthood by detailing 44 such cases in the English-language press over a five-year period, as well as the dynamics and impact of this abuse within a group of 10 women he worked with in therapy. He found that the average duration of abuse within this group was 31 years and that over the course of this abuse, they had endured an estimated average of 3,320 sexual assaults. All had been abused by multiple others, including eight also by their grandfather. The incestuous abuse they described involved the manipulation of their sexual arousal by their father, as well as of their survival tools, most centrally dissociation and attachment. An intensely difficult ambivalence was at the heart of how the abuse impacted them: eight of the ten described feeling fused with their father (nine felt that their body did not belong to themselves) and in parallel nine had seriously contemplating killing him.

McMaugh et al. (2024) picked up on these themes in their study of 10 therapists who reported on their experience and case conceptualisation of 19 clients reporting ongoing incestuous abuse in adulthood, some of whom had also experienced organised abuse, several involving rituals. These therapists further detailed the manipulation of victims' survival tools by perpetrators in their efforts to perpetuate the abuse. For example, child parts of the victim might be triggered who only knew compliance as a way to cope, unaware of other options and power that the adult self might have available. And a victim's belief that deep down their abuser loved them both protected them from the horror and betrayal of the alternative, but also meant that they continued to comply, with some seeing it as an expression of love.

> "If she believed everything her father said… she felt valued… loved. But if she [believed] that he was a sexual predator, abused her… then she felt completely devalued… it just destroyed her sense of self.
>
> The father and mother would both use exactly the same triggers and cues that they did in childhood, and they would call on [dissociated part]… who had to please Daddy… and she [part] would leap in there and offer sex, because that's what she believes she had to do."
>
> Therapists cited by McMaugh et al. (2024a)

Turning to the wider organised abuse, 25% of the adults surveyed by Schröder et al. (2018) reported that they had not managed to 'exit the organised/ritual abuse structures successfully'. Again this abuse typically involves perpetrators exploiting survival tools victims developed in childhood. In an interview study of 16 individuals reporting organised abuse continuing from child into adulthood (two-thirds of whom disclosed ritual abuse),[36] and 18 professionals who had supported people experiencing this, Salter (2017) detailed a case to illustrate common features. 'Rosie' after building trust with an art therapist began to disclose abuse from a group of men who would apprehend her on her commute from work. Upon seeing them, a younger, compliant part of her would be triggered, and she was then taken to a property where she reported being subjected to sexual assaults and electroshocks.

36 Seven of these individuals were included in his original study of organised abuse.

Her therapist recounted that she would 'lose consciousness and find herself at their property', and that as time went on and she began to believe that the abuse was inevitable, she started making arrangements with the men – 'agreeing' to the sexual assaults if they stopped the shocks. After such attacks, she presented in therapy profoundly traumatised, in pain and with unusual injuries.

Whilst Rosie's therapist taught her skills to reduce the risk of younger parts being triggered, and friends tried to intercept the perpetrators' abductions, these efforts were not altogether effective. Therefore, therapy was often focussed on 'just keeping her alive… helping her nervous system to have at least two hours where she's not in a state of terror, where she feels safe, and held, and cared about… it's just band aids, survival therapy'. Protection and help from the wider system was not forthcoming: after a child part called a children's helpline, 'the police came round to the house and discovered she was a woman in her thirties, just dismissed the whole thing. After that she never trusted them again' (her therapist quoted by Salter, 2017). And, at the other extreme, a GP who she disclosed to in the hope of medical care for internal injuries reported the abuse against her will, incorrectly citing mandatory reporting rules.[37]

This case starkly illustrates the wider pattern experienced by victims of this abuse, one characterised by perpetrators' brazen exploitation of their victims' vulnerabilities; an ill-equipped system blinding itself to the problem and retraumatizing those victims who seek its help; and the blaming and tarnishing of those who try to support them (McMaugh, 2024a; 2024b; Middleton, 2015; Salter, 2017). At times, this situation also means that survivors' own children are at risk – a number describe the harrowing situation of their children being abused by those who had first abused them (Salter, 2012; 2017).

Lastly, survivors are also at risk of revictimization by new abusers, individuals unconnected to the original set. Perpetrators target those they perceive to be vulnerable, and vulnerabilities to revictimization include not only dissociative and appeasement-based coping styles, but also PTSD, negative core beliefs about one's own worth and power, as well as substance misuse and emotion regulation difficulties (Hanson, 2016). And the general lack of acknowledgement, understanding, resources, and responsive systems means that all this occurs within a conducive societal context.

37 These only applied to reports of children (not adults) being abused.

10. The societal context

10.1 Conspiracy fictions[38]

In 2014, two children, a brother and sister aged eight and nine years old living in Hampstead, north London, reported to their mother and then police that they were being ritually abused by a satanic ring involving roughly 175 individuals, including their father, teachers, parents of other children, police officers, social workers, and religious leaders. They reported that numerous children were being abused, including all those in their school classes, and that babies were being shipped into the country via DHL to be killed. Their allegations took the form of extreme horrors being recounted in a matter of fact, list-type fashion without visible fear or emotion, for example, 'we do sex with the baby, sacrifice and eat the baby and drink blood from it… we dance with the skulls'.[39] [40]

A police investigation found no evidence to corroborate the children's claims – secret rooms they named in their school did not exist; nor did several of the alleged perpetrators; and none of the other many alleged victims disclosed anything untoward. Instead, the investigation discovered that the children had been subjected to 'relentless emotional and psychological pressure as well as significant physical abuse' (in the words of a later family court judgement) by their mother's boyfriend, Abraham Christie, a long time conspiracy theorist, in the context of a custody dispute between their parents.

Christie and the children's mother, Ella Draper, however continued the fiction and sought to draw support to their cause. Christie shared online videos of the children's allegations, sparking a huge campaign leading to the harassment and intimidation of many of the parents who had been accused. One of the main ringleaders of this abuse, Sabine McNeill, in 2019 was sentenced to nine years for her role. The judge's summary of the harm she caused speaks to the profound damage such conspiracy fictions can cause: 'for the four families concerned, you have ruined all normal family life. Their children have been unable to attend school normally and are either home-schooled or have to carry tracking devices and alarms. The families have escape routes planned in case of attack and mothers have slept on the floors of their children's bedrooms to protect them. They have had to move homes, they have had businesses ruined as a result of being unable to have an online profile. The children's lives have been blighted forever'.

This is just one of several influential conspiracy fictions that have sprung up publicly claiming without due cause that specific individuals are involved in 'satanic ritual abuse' and causing widespread harm in the process. Another of recent years started in 2016, when some users of 4Chan, an online messaging board with a reputation for pranks and LARPing (live action role-playing),[41] attempted to generate interest in an otherwise uninteresting cache of leaked emails from one of Hilary Clinton's aides. They did this by translating innocuous words within the emails into a code for child sexual abuse – so 'hotdog' became 'boy', 'pizza' meant 'girl', 'ice cream' meant 'male prostitute' and so forth (Ball, 2023).

38 This term, coined by George Monbiot (2024), is generally used here to denote what are otherwise commonly termed 'conspiracy theories'. 'Conspiracy theory', for reasons outlined further below, is in fact a confusing term because it can lump together two distinctly different sets of beliefs (warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories; Keeley, 1999), causing confusion and harm in the process.

39 The details of this case summarised here have been gathered from media reports including Channel 4 (2024), Jessop (2024) and Montali (2022).

40 As part of my role at CEOP (the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre) I was asked to review details of this case in 2014. I noted that the aetiology, content and style of the allegations differed markedly from those of typical allegations of ritual abuse I had come across – for example, there was an absence of tentativeness, shame, and fears of both reprisals and of disbelief. Christie's reports appeared to have something of a psychotic quality.

41 Live action role-playing can take the form of people acting out a fiction in online spaces, but the fact that it is fiction may be unbeknown to other users who may take what they are saying seriously and act accordingly.

As would become a pattern with the QAnon set of conspiracy fictions, what started off as a game or con on 4Chan soon took on a life of its own as the ideas migrated off the platform into more mainstream parts of the internet and rumours took hold. The 'pizza-gate' conspiracy fiction evolved into a narrative of extensive satanic ritual abuse perpetrated by a paedophile ring operating from the basement of a pizza restaurant and involving Hilary Clinton and those within her circle (Ball, 2023).

Going back in time, the first case of a highly publicised furore over apparent ritual abuse was the huge and complex McMartin preschool case in California, which started with a set of allegations in 1983 of sexual abuse by a particular preschool teacher, Raymond Buckey, and ended seven years later in 1990 with a deadlocked jury, and no convictions of the many accused individuals, at the end of a second trial. Unlike the conspiracy fictions detailed above, this case involved substantial evidence (including medical) that children had been sexually abused by the prime suspect, Buckey (Cheit, 2014). However, the case was mishandled in various ways, leading to intense media coverage exaggerating the evidence before any arrests had been made (based on leaked information), a set of leading and at times manipulative interviews with numerous children (led by interviewers who had become convinced that children were holding back information), and parents acting as informal investigators, having been encouraged at one point by police to be so (Cheit, 2014). In this milieu, allegations of organised ritual abuse emerged but, despite investigation, corroborative evidence for them was not forthcoming (deYoung, 1997). Analysis of the case indicates that they were likely the product of conspiracies being projected onto a more straightforward situation of mass sexual abuse,[42] and the manipulative (albeit often well-intentioned) practices towards children that they spiralled with (Cheit, 2014).

This case has been hugely influential in divergent (yet related) ways. On the one hand, it likely provided something of a blueprint for subsequent conspiracy fictions – some onlookers saw in the case horrendous ritualistic abuse being ignored and covered up and were perhaps more likely as a result to jump to this conclusion in other situations. On the other, this case (alongside others; York, 2021) provided the starting point for the 'satanic panic' narrative, which argues that all (or the vast majority) of ritual abuse allegations are caused by a 'moral panic' and/or false memories and suggestibility. As I go on to explore, this discourse of disbelief (Lovett, Coy & Kelly, 2018; Richardson, 2015) ironically mirrors and is symbiotic with the conspiracy fictions it scoffs at.

Conspiracy theories have been described as the 'unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other explanations are more probable' (Aaronovitch, 2010). They tend to involve people jumping to the conclusion that others have been conspiring in secret to exert great harm (for example, the belief that the Covid vaccine involves the insertion of microchips, or that HIV was invented in a lab). But it is critical that they are distinguished from evidence-based analyses of the secretive misuse of power to exert harm. The two groups of people taking seriously these two types of 'conspiracy theory' tend to be very different (Klein, 2023; Monbiot, 2024). As Monbiot (2024) observes: 'An extraordinary aspect of this issue is that there's so little overlap between conspiracy fantasists and conspiracy theorists. Those who believe unevidenced stories about hidden cabals and secret machinations tend to display no interest in well-documented stories about hidden cabals and secret machinations'. This contrast is evident when we compare those who take evidence of ritual abuse seriously (most visibly, survivor organisations, those working in child protection, therapists and some academics) versus those who pursue fictions about it, who tend to have little engagement in wider collective efforts against abuse.

The likely explanation for this incongruity comes from the different motivations, pathways and thinking styles that underlie the two positions.

42 At the time, the phenomenon of ritual abuse had recently come to light through the publication of a memoir, and there were latent insecurities about daycare, a new institution in American life (York, 2021).

A wealth of research into unwarranted conspiracy theories indicates that they are associated with error prone thinking styles and logical fallacies (such as a teleological bias,[43] illusory pattern perception and the conjunction fallacy;[44] Brotherton & French, 2014; Van Prooijen, Douglas & De Inocencio, 2018; Wagner-Egger et al., 2018) and that they serve foundational motives: for certainty in the face of uncertainty, for control in the face of powerlessness, and for a positive image of self and group, especially when this is low or under threat (for a review see Douglas & Sutton, 2023).

In short, they are the result of motivated reasoning: normative, superior ways of judging truth are discarded in favour of styles of thinking that turn up conspiracies, these being sought because they offer (often false) promises of meaning, safety and self-worth (Douglas, Sutton & Cichocka, 2017). Such beliefs are often attempts to protect people from the negative feelings that a realistic appraisal of the world would provoke (for example, if climate change is a con designed to hold back capitalist progress, people don't have to concern themselves with the painful and messy process of system change). Spotting secret cabals can lead people to feel they have 'one up' on them by blowing their cover – this gives an illusion of power without truly assuaging powerlessness (Douglas et al., 2017). Note that the motives of those who push conspiracy theories ('conspiracy entrepreneurs') may be quite different to those of people accepting them (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009) – those with power may use conspiracy theories to deflect attention away from their own nefarious actions or support of an unjust status quo.[45]

Conspiracy theories arrived at by faulty reasoning and social persuasion to serve various self-interests are of course fundamentally different from those arrived at by a process of honest evidence-gathering. Facing the realities of people's secretive misuse of power (for example, government corruption or obscured corporate lobbying) is hard and demands difficult, collective action, and indeed there are existential motives to turn away from this knowledge.

A concerning situation is now in play in which those pushing unwarranted conspiracy theories have co-opted the language on conspiracies, making it harder for those of us wanting to draw attention to real scandals (Klein, 2023). Relatedly, to avoid the errors of conspiracy fictionalists and the stigma around them, many veer away from all discussion of conspiracies. All are held suspect, all deemed the work of fictionalists. This naturally serves the interests of those misusing power – any talk of what they are doing can be summarily dismissed as a conspiracy theory.

Naomi Klein has experienced the frustrations of this situation more than most, having spent her life extensively researching systemic injustices, only to be regularly confused with the prolific conspiracy fictionalist Naomi Wolf. As she observes in her book Doppelganger (2023), 'Again and again [Wolf] was saying things that sounded a little like the argument I made in the Shock Doctrine but refracted through a funhouse mirror of plots and conspiracies based almost exclusively on a series of hunches' (p. 35-36). Klein delineates not only the harms of conspiracy fictions, but also those of a mainstream society that has been unwilling to face and grapple with real injustices and abuses of authority – as she notes, conspiracy theorists 'get the facts wrong, but often the feelings right' (p. 242) – we do live in a society in which many secretively exploit power and influence. And this situation is made invariably worse when attempts to bring this to light are met with a knee-jerk suspicion of conspiracy theory.

43 This is the tendency to attribute a purpose and final cause to natural events and entities.
44 The error of judging two conjoint events as more probable than by themselves.
45 See chapter 14 in Klein (2023) for an incisive account of the fomenting of antisemitic conspiracy theories by authorities (including the Nazis) to divert attention away from class injustice. "Over the centuries, anti-Jewish conspiracy has played a very specific purpose for elite power: it acts as a buffer, a shock absorber. Before popular rage could reach the kings, queens, tsars, and old landed money, the conspiracies absorbed it, directing anger to the middle managers – to the court Jew, to the scheming Jew… to Shylock" (p. 286)

> It is as if when something becomes an issue in the Mirror World, it automatically ceases to matter everywhere else. This has happened on so many issues that I sometimes feel as if we are tethered to each other as reverse marionettes: their arm goes up, ours goes down. We kick, they hug.
>
> Naomi Klein (2023, p.21)

Ritual abuse is a paradigmatic example of an issue that has fallen prey to these dynamics. The abuse of power, malevolency and secrecy at its heart provide fertile terrain for conspiracy fantasising, and these aspects and the fictions they inspire also trigger its knee-jerk rejection. As I now go on to explore, society's approach is predominantly a discourse of disbelief, fuelled by this suspicion of conspiracy thinking alongside other animating forces.

10.2 The discourse of disbelief

> It seems that reports of organised abuse can be overlooked, ignored, or displaced onto minority groups, but it is too troubling a subject to approach directly without a framework of disbelief.
>
> Salter (2008b)

The core tenets of the discourse of disbelief are that organised ritual abuse does not exist in the western world[46] and that allegations of such are instead the product of the following medley: 'satanic panic' (i.e. a form of 'moral panic'), hysteria and contagion, a 'witch-hunt', false memory, zealous social workers and therapists using suggestive techniques, children imagining things from watching horror films, and evangelical Christians projecting evil onto religions that they are at odds with (Satanism, Paganism, the occult) (Cheit, 2014; Kitzinger, 2003; Lovett et al., 2018; Richardson, 2015; Salter, 2008b). It is underpinned by a commitment to applying a much higher threshold of belief to reports of organised and ritual abuse than would be applied to other truth claims, despite this being unwarranted (especially when the history and psychology of abuse, sadism and trauma is considered). And, like the fictions discussed above, it involves applying a much lower threshold of belief to conspiratorial claims that are lacking in evidence (for example, that there is a vast network of therapists engaging in malpractice).

In the 1980s and 1990s, a set of child sexual abuse cases that were 'extreme' either in the number of perpetrators and victims involved and/or in the nature of the alleged abuse came to be narrated by the discourse of disbelief and publicly understood in this way. Media coverage ignored credible evidence of abuse (including that with a ritualistic dimension) and explained it away as the product of suggestive practices, children's confusions, false memory and the like.[47] Shaming and smearing of involved practitioners was central. Some of these cases had indeed involved professionals making mistakes, yet this did not adequately explain away all evidence of abuse (in the form of disclosures and/or medical findings) in the way that it was claimed to. Inquiry findings of abuse or that vindicated the concerned professionals were ignored in favour of those that fitted the 'moral panic' narrative (Campbell, 2023; Nelson, 2016). One such case is summarised here as illustrative of this pattern, which also included cases in Orkney, Rochdale, Cleveland, and a number in the United States.

46 This might come with some caveats (for example, that there have been a few 'milder' cases). And ritual abuse solely perpetrated by African immigrants due to spiritual beliefs is not disputed by this discourse.

47 It is beyond this report's remit to detail each of these cases, but please see the following texts for in-depth accounts: Campbell (2023); Cheit (2014); Cheit & Mervis (2007); Nelson (2016); Salter (2008; 2016).

The Broxtowe case

In 1986, three months after entering care, a three-year-old boy in Broxtowe, Nottingham, started disclosing to his foster carers sexual abuse and degradation at the hands of his family members. This was the first of a set of extensive allegations made by him, his siblings and cousins over time to their foster carers.48 These children described 'how they were passed around adults, abused and tortured, sometimes daily; and how they were forced to watch the same things happening to siblings and cousins. They were starved, physically injured and humiliated' (Dawson, 1990). Many aspects of their accounts corroborated one another (including those of accounts of children in different foster placements who only had supervised contact).

Their disclosures were accompanied by intense fear and extreme phobias related to the abuse, and by medical evidence of chronic sexual and physical abuse, which was also confirmed by their mothers. They described 'sex parties' involving numerous individuals and their grandfather as the ringleader (who had been convicted for sexually abusing his daughter in 1975). And they reported various extreme and ritualistic elements in the abuse including: the use of sticks, snakes and spiders; being made to eat faeces; animals being 'sacrificed' and the children made to drink their blood; perpetrators dressed as witches, the devil, clowns and monsters; babies placed in the centre of a circle to then be hurt; and being injected with needles and given liquids and tablets that made them feel strange.

The case involved both family and criminal courts. In wardship proceedings, the judge found that the children had experienced abuse 'often accompanied by strange and obscene rites' – 'dreadful and… satanic nonsense' (conclusions endorsed by three Appeal Court judges). A decision was made not to include most of the ritualistic elements in the criminal trial – it was felt that this 'would complicate an already complex enterprise' (Dawson, 1990), and as discussed, such elements are commonly omitted by prosecutors because they can prompt kneejerk disbelief whilst adding little, as they do not map onto specific charges. However, the court did hear of 'witch parties' and the grandfather dressed in a devil's costume, and an unexpected visitor to the family described naked adults dancing round children sitting in a circle with candles. These criminal proceedings resulted in 10 adults (including the grandfather) being convicted for gross cruelty and sexual abuse relating to 12 children. The social workers involved were widely praised at the time, including by the local MP, Graham Allen, who commented that 'the work of the Nottinghamshire social services department has been magnificent. This case has revealed that child sex abuse can run on in families from generation to generation. We must break now this link of depravity that runs through generations for good'.

However, problems arose when social workers requested that police investigate further allegations the children had made about adults outside of the family. These requests were met with resistance and, as the conflict increased, threats to discredit them. In this context, the police and Director of Social Services, David White, commissioned an inquiry, that was run by a team of individuals who did not interview key parties such as the social workers and foster carers, and ran with the main tropes of the discourse of disbelief. The authors of the report leaked it to the media, which then promoted this version of events so that it became the 'last word' on the case, rather than the evidence heard in both courts, the conclusions of the judges, David White's nuanced response to this report, or its rebuttal by the relevant social workers (White, 1990). For example, at the time of writing, the three sentences on the case in Wikipedia49 only reference the report and its conclusions ('that there was no evidence of the satanic ritual abuse claims') and omit mention of all other facts, including the court proceedings or convictions.

48 Details of the case reported here are referenced in Campbell (2023); Dawson (1990); Donnelly & Stewart (1989); Evening Post (1989); and/or White (1990).
49 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_satanic_ritual_abuse_allegations#Broxtowe

In the early nineties, the journalist Beatrix Campbell (2023) interviewed in prison one of the mothers convicted in this case. She was fearful of her impending release and wanted to share her story. She described a similar childhood of abuse to that which her own children were subjected to, including abuse parties where adults dressed up and 'Dad was the devil' – 'when I was a child my parents talked about the devil all the time. They said I was "born for the devil"'. When she grew up and had her own children, 'my Mum and Dad said, "they're not children to be loved… they're an ornament to be messed with"'. Her role in the abuse had been to control the children, and she used fear to achieve this. She described how she had gained a sense of pleasure and arousal from the pain she saw in the children. It appears she was also attempting to take a honest approach with the police when they took her to some of the other locations identified by the children, but they were disinterested: "'don't give me this!" About porn, the videos, the witches, devils, dead babies… that's what they said.' (Campbell, 2023).

The wider pattern of disbelief

Broxtowe's retelling as a case of 'satanic panic' was part of a 'rush' that took hold in the early nineties, 'to "prove" that ritual abuse did not exist' (O'Sullivan, 1997). In a rare candid media piece from that decade, reporter Jack O'Sullivan (1997) describes what he observed in his profession at the time: journalists replacing their inquiring spirit with their own feelings of incredulity; assumptions of 'evil social workers' being applied before cases were explored; and a mantra that 'there is no evidence that ritual abuse exists', when 'the press was, and still is, in no position to pronounce in this way'. As he observed, journalists had no access to the children involved in these cases and social workers were bound by duties of confidentiality.50 And this refusal to countenance ritual abuse meant that cases that did come to light were underreported (sometimes only appearing in only one newspaper)51 and their similarities with others that had irrefutable evidence of sadistic abuse and murder were ignored (Kelly, 1998).

All of this was against the backdrop of a wider trend of suspicious reporting around child sexual abuse in general (Lovett et al., 2018). Cases were widely decried as 'witch-hunts' and allegations put down to 'false memory syndrome'– a term that despite its clinical connotations was invented by those accused of sexual abuse by their adult offspring and is not a recognised psychiatric condition (Kitzinger, 2003; Salter, 2008, 2016). Whilst understandably caution should be taken around memories of abuse that have emerged through a process of therapist suggestion and directed imagination or hypnosis, sweeping claims of 'false memory' were routinely made when there was no evidence that such circumstances applied (Kitzinger, 2003). Kitzinger's media research and interviews with UK journalists found that the British False Memory Society, like its US equivalent set up by accused parents, was able to shape the media narrative in part because journalists were looking to provide a new story about child

50 This state of play has also been widely documented elsewhere, for example see Campbell (2023), Nelson (2016) and Salter (2008, 2016).

51 For example, the West Country case discussed above appears to have been only reported by The Mirror, and this article appears to have omitted many of its extreme details.

abuse – as one journalist commented, 'everyone was getting sick with the child abuse story… every day another celebrity popped up saying they had been abused as a child and people wanted something new' (Kitzinger, 2003, p. 100).

A second major factor was journalists' tendency to give empathy and belief to people who they could identify with (for example, 'they were a lovely couple… my gut reaction was positive', p.102), versus those disclosing abuse: 'they may have taken drugs, they may have gone into alcohol, they may be slightly unbalanced. So we never quite trust them' (p.102). In these judgements, sexism and double standards around male and female displays of emotion loomed large, as one survivor put it, 'He [her father] can use his suicidal thoughts as proof of his innocence, my suicidal thoughts are proof of my guilt' (p.100). Typically, articles afforded accused men extensive air time, whilst offering none to their accusers. And such articles dominated coverage of child sexual abuse – an analysis of media reporting on child sexual abuse in the US found that between 1992 and 1994, 73% focussed on false allegations and false memories (Beckett, 1996).

Jean La Fontaine's Department of Health report

It was in this milieu that the Department of Health published the anthropologist Jean La Fontaine's research into ritual abuse (La Fontaine, 1994).[52] Her research was partnered with that of Bernard Gallagher and colleagues (1996), in that the initial stage of both their projects was the survey of police forces, social services and NSPCC teams that enquired about organised child abuse cases (discussed above). She followed this with a file analysis of 34 cases of 'alleged ritual abuse' documented in care proceedings.

The report that followed contained information about case characteristics (for example, age and gender of victims) intermingled with various remarks that insinuated, without adequate evidence, that allegations were not credible. For example, early on she comments: 'While their stories [adults' reports of ritual abuse] are said to confirm what children have said, in fact survivors are probably more significant in creating a climate of belief before cases involving children are discovered' (emphasis in original). Here she sets up a dichotomy between adults' accounts of ritual abuse providing broad support either before or after children's disclosures, but these timings are only in tension, if the adults' disclosures are inherently suspect and exerting a nefarious influence. No evidence for such influence is provided. Thus, an aspersion is cast through a sleight of hand – an apparent reality is conveyed to the reader without the need for actual evidence.[53]

Such remarks are reflective of a wider lack of commitment to transparency and methodological rigour (Nelson, 2016). The reader is given no information on the approach used to analyse the files, although examples provided in her later book that draws on this research (La Fontaine, 1998) suggest a biased approach in which 'a catch-22 reading is set up whereby similarities [between victim accounts] are evidence of collusion whilst discrepancies are evidence of invention' (Scott, 2001).[54]

52 This is discussed at some length given its outsized influence on the discourse and practice of disbelief in the United Kingdom – decades later, it is still used as the 'last word' in debates about ritual abuse. For readers for whom its detail is not of interest or relevance, there is the invitation to skip to the next section on practices of disbelief and silence.

53 A few examples of other such remarks are: 'Foster parents described a good deal of stress and needed more than usual support from social workers. The resulting interaction was a source of mutual influence between foster-parents and social workers' – this, in the context of other observations, worked to imply that foster parents were not reliable recipients of children's disclosures. 'Some specialists are fundamentalist Christians; others are not. Some are social workers or therapists; some have a psychological training but their involvement rests on their claims to knowledge of ritual (satanic) abuse, rather than their formal qualifications. They form a heterogeneous category of people with little in common except a committed belief in the existence of satanic abuse.' Here those with apparent expertise on the subject of ritual abuse are painted as ideological (and arguably the reference to 'fundamentalist Christians' is pejorative). On the subject of the allegations she comments, 'those involved in his [the devil's] worship may be said to include people of wealth and political power, whose connections form a conspiratorial network of national, or even international, extent'. It is not clear here if this accurately reflects all or even some of the children's disclosures, or if it instead reflects the content of conspiracy fictions she has come across.

54 See Scott (2001, p. 46-48) for a delineated example of this, in which La Fontaine (1998) compares the reports of two sisters.

Much is made of findings that support a sceptical approach (for example, that costumes were not found),[55] and those pointing in the other direction are given just brief mention or downplayed (for example, the finding that there were convictions in over a fifth of ritual abuse cases, and there were previous sexual convictions in at least six of the 17 ritual cases for which there was data). Many observations are made for which no data is offered in support – to cite but one of numerous examples: 'there is evidence in the transcript that in the course of repeated interviews children learn what it is that adults want to hear' (p. 27), but this evidence is not specified. In sum, nearly all of the findings said to question credibility must be taken on the author's authority (Scott, 1998).

The conclusion to this report then makes various bold claims that the reported research has provided no basis for. It casts adolescent victims in an unfavourable light, asserts without evidence the 'powerful influence' of an Evangelical Christian campaign, and sees foster carers' belief in what children as functional, allowing them to care 'with patience and sympathy'. And the commitment to taking seriously disclosures of ritual abuse is misconstrued as 'demonising the marginal poor and linking them to unknown satanists'.

La Fontaine concludes that there is no evidence for 'satanic abuse' as differentiated from 'ritual, not satanic, abuse' – for which she grants there is some evidence. This distinction rests on her defining the former as abuse 'directed to a magical or religious objective' versus situations where rituals are solely instruments for abuse. Such a distinction is problematic in numerous ways – it wrongly assumes that perpetrators' beliefs can be reliably identified and are either present or absent (versus somewhere in between); it sidelines the child, who is terrified by the supernatural narratives whatever the perpetrators' beliefs; and it makes it difficult to describe ritual abuse where specific religious narratives are used but motives are not assumed (if satanic ideology is used, we cannot call it that). This invalid distinction enabled a further sleight of hand. La Fontaine and a receptive media proclaimed that the report found no evidence of 'satanic ritual abuse' – a claim that persists to this day. In this exercise, the fact that her definition necessitated a religious motive was not made clear, and the acknowledged existence of 'ritual abuse' was left unmentioned.

La Fontaine's problematic methodology, analysis and conclusions are predictable based on the mindset she brought to the research. Her funding application (La Fontaine, n.d.), around which there has been no transparency, reveals a blinkered concern about Evangelical Christians panicked about international networks of satanic abuse, because they are in confrontation with Satanism and other 'new religious movements'. Such a theory was in keeping with dominant currents in her profession of anthropology at the time and has been widely espoused by others in various books and articles (for example, Victor, 1992; Goodwin, 2018). She outlines 'two theoretical aims' for the research, only one of which is detailed at length[56] – this is 'to lay a foundation for a contribution to anthropological theories of religion and in particular to its understanding of beliefs in evil mystical powers'. Her 'working hypothesis would be that periodic reforming movements within Christianity establish their claims to exclusive access to spiritual power by accusations of witchcraft and of compacts with the devil against other religious groups; they thus render rival claims to spiritual authority not merely illegitimate, but inimical to the moral order of society' (La Fontaine, n.d.).

This theory is entirely independent of the question of whether ritual abuse exists: naturally individuals can use rituals in their abuse of children, whilst some Christian groups may have motives to see ritual abuse in religions they perceive a conflict with.

55 Interestingly she notes that the Broxtowe case was included in her analysis – a case with clear evidence that costumes were destroyed, yet this is not noted. This evidence was mentioned in the trial (Donnelly & Stewart, 1989) and also came up in a 1990 documentary in which neighbours said that suspects had set bonfires in their backyards before the arrests. One of the convicted commented to Beatrix Campbell in a subsequent interview, 'well of course, most of the evidence was destroyed before the arrests, because we knew they were going to happen' (Campbell, 2023).

56 The other, briefly mentioned, was that the research could test her view that abuse was more likely to be committed in the home than by an 'evil stranger'. No mention was made here of ritual abuse.

However, La Fontaine and many others collapse the two – if Christians (and others) project ritual abuse onto religions they fear, then this means it does not really exist. This is a clear example of the symbiosis between conspiracy fictions and the discourse of disbelief – they feed off one another, and curious attention to the testimony of victims and survivors gets lost between them. In short, La Fontaine's focus on religious beliefs (both in the minds of the perpetrators and those engaged in 'satanic panic') did not allow her to answer the question (of the existence of ritual abuse) that her report was thought to be about.

La Fontaine's conclusion that she found no evidence of 'satanic ritual abuse' was readily embraced and promoted by a media and commentariat already caught up in narratives of 'satanic panic', 'witch-hunts', and false memory (Lovett et al., 2018). The belief that robust research, commissioned by the Department of Health, had found no evidence of ritual abuse became the widely accepted truth in the UK and effectively the final word on the matter – the debate was over (Nelson, 2016; for an example see French, 2014). This mirrored the situation in other countries across the West, where misinformation and obfuscation were similarly used to reach the same conclusions – conclusions which, despite their flaws, have not undergone mainstream revision since (Salter & Woodlock, 2023).

10.3 Practices of disbelief and silence

The discourse of disbelief is inseparable from the practices that follow from it – practices that interactively work to keep it in place in a vicious spiral (Nelson, 2016). Such 'practices of disbelief' include hostility towards people who persist in calling attention to the issue, and their derogation and ridicule. To do so therefore carries significant reputational risk and so is understandably necessarily avoided by many.

Relatedly, there is the practice of societal silence – around organised child abuse generally and ritual abuse in particular – from the media, from academia, and relevant societal institutions (notwithstanding notable exceptions) (Salter & Woodlock, 2023). Despite survivors continuing to disclose to helplines, therapists and trusted researchers, their experiences are rarely heard publicly. As noted, after the mid-1990s, research publications have declined. In tandem, the rigorous in-depth research that has been published has largely been ignored (Scott, personal communication). In the UK, statutory multi-agency child protection guidance went from including a definition of organised child abuse in 1991 to removing all mention of it by 2013 (Davies, 2014, 2016). The latest edition (HM Government, 2023) continues with this omission, and while it gives a definition of 'extra-familial harm' which includes the example of 'modern slavery and trafficking', it provides no definition of intrafamilial harm, let alone the organised and ritual abuse that this can include.[57] This may encourage, or at least colludes with, statutory services applying higher thresholds to the investigation of this abuse (also see section below on disclosure and professional responses).

> "The principle seemed to be 'let's try not to investigate'; I thought 'how much evidence do you want before we do?' – it was far beyond what we'd usually need"
>
> Former Detective Chief Inspector Clive Driscoll on how allegations of ritualized abuse were approached within a UK police force

57 Whilst of course, as discussed, this abuse is not limited to intrafamilial offenders.

Organised intrafamilial and/or ritual abuse cases that do reach the courts are afforded scant media coverage, whilst in parallel the rehearsed story of 'satanic panic' is routinely used as a cautionary tale by commentators drawing attention to more modern (alleged) hysterias (for example, see Barnes, 2024; Joyce, 2021). Podcasts, documentaries and online sources such as Wikipedia[58] continue to highlight and challenge conspiracy fictions, whilst giving no airtime to established cases and perpetuating the false dichotomy that ritual abuse must either be the product of conspiracy fantasies or non-existent (for example, Mostrous et al., 2022).

Conspiracy theorising and logical errors in the discourse of disbelief

Claims that organised ritual abuse does not exist in the Western world must somehow deal with the evidence that it does. Several strategies are employed in this endeavour including:

- Simple omission – claiming that evidence which does exist does not (for example, convictions for ritual abuse)
- Applying a false dichotomy, as discussed above ('either it's a conspiracy theory or it doesn't exist' – rather than logically acknowledging that real cases and conspiracy theories can co-exist). In this endeavour, the views of those who take it seriously are misrepresented or caricatured
- Dismissing all recovered memories as false memories, despite the psychological and forensic evidence to the contrary[59]
- Holding a suspicion of Dissociative Identity Disorder and its origins in trauma, despite all the evidence to the contrary
- Asserting widespread malpractice by social workers. They are said to manipulate children into ritual abuse allegations because they see it everywhere, having been 'contaminated' by workshops and self-professed experts. A large scale review of referrals to police and social services (involving information from a diversity of sources) could find no evidence of such practice (Gallagher, 2001).
- Similarly, presupposing that huge numbers of therapists are applying methods that lead their clients to develop whole libraries of false memories (this is usually required to explain the numbers of people disclosing ritual abuse in anonymous surveys, on helplines, and the like). Not only do we lack substantive evidence that this is even possible (Brewin & Andrews, 2016),[60] it would entail multiple therapists risking their reputation and livelihood (by going against professional codes of conduct) for no obvious gain.

58 Wikipedia clearly demonstrates the power of the disbelief discourse. Editors have only allowed for this narrative on the site, and websites providing knowledge of ritual abuse have been blacklisted (Lacter, 2009). This appears to be part of a wider pattern of the site mirroring and compounding societal power dynamics (Mead 2023; Koerner, 2019).

59 See the archive of corroborated cases of recovered memory and relevant scientific research managed by Legal Professor Ross Cheit at recoveredmemory.org

60 And such a level of suggestibility would be highly dysfunctional and compromising of human life. It is hard to imagine its evolutionary value.

- Postulating that knowledge of ritual abuse leads people to 'see' it where it doesn't exist. As Dawson (1990) rightly observes, such arguments are totalitarian in nature (the idea that more knowledge is dangerous). And on this basis, we should avoid acknowledging any problem as real (back pain, bullying, racism, riots) in case this causes widespread fictitious beliefs.

Other logical errors include:

- The circular argument that because abuse allegations include ritual elements, they therefore effectively cannot be true. An example of this comes from Hon Justice JRT Wood (1997; cited in Salter, 2008a) who led a Royal Commission into allegations of organised child abuse in New South Wales, Australia: 'While it must be recognised that apparently respectable and successful members of the community do commit child sexual abuse, a quantum leap in credibility is required to suppose that they would do so in the bizarre, ritualistic way described'
- Likening ritual abuse allegations to those involving supernatural elements, such as alien abduction (for example, Paley, 1997, and see reply by Cook & Kelly, 1997), despite ritual abuse not requiring any additional elements than the human psychology on display in numerous other circumstances across history.
- 'Moving the goalposts' (or shape-shifting) – an appropriate definition of ritual abuse is used (or implied) which is then narrowed to exclude proven cases (for example, as discussed, to include a requirement for religious motives)

In sum, it is ironic that the discourse of disbelief mirrors the logical fallacies and conjecturing of the conspiracy fictions that it opposes (and, indeed, because of this thinking, sees everywhere).

10.4 What underpins default disbelief?

The discourse of disbelief operates a special scepticism for allegations of ritual abuse, persisting in the face of converging lines of evidence on ritual abuse and blinkering itself through logical errors. This indicates that motivated reasoning is at play, and one such motive, apparent from the discussion above, is likely the well-intentioned desire to challenge fictitious and harmful conspiracy theories. Relatedly, some see allegations of ritual abuse as a form of intolerance for minority religions (such as satanism and paganism) and so seem motivated to dismiss them in a bid to protect these movements (La Fontaine, n.d.; Goodwin, 2018). However challenging conspiracy theories or religious prejudice is perfectly possible without discounting evidence of ritual abuse. There is reason to hypothesise a cluster of more foundational motives that relate to the extreme horror of this abuse in the face of primal desires for justice and safety, and illusions in the modern Western world of their fulfilment.

Just World Theory, developed by Melvin Lerner (1980) more than 40 years ago and for which there is now a wealth of evidence, argues that people have a fundamental need to live in a just world (Hafer & Bègue, 2005).

A just world provides safety and confidence (*if I do the right thing, no harm will come to me;* and *if I work hard, I will live a good life*) and believing that one's world is fair (even if it isn't) can be an adaptive illusion, providing that sense of security and motivating ethical, long-term commitments. However, difficulties develop when this illusion is rigidly maintained in the face of challenge, and strategies are used in its service which in fact increase injustice. Research, for example, finds that the belief in a just world can lead to victim blame and derogation (Ellard, Harvey & Callan, 2016; Hafer & Sutton, 2016) – these stances are used to cognitively 'right the wrong' (*what happened wasn't that unfair because she kind-of deserved it*), versus attempts to actually do so (for example, through recognition of the crimes committed, and efforts at accountability and prevention; McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019).

It is hard to envisage a greater threat to the belief that one's world is a fair place than allegations of organised ritual abuse – involving as they do tortures and atrocities inflicted on vulnerable young children by those entrusted with their care and protection. If such things are said to happen in other cultures, distancing and othering strategies can be applied (*my world is still safe – it's just their world that isn't*), but when they are said to happen within one's own, other tools are required, and here disbelief would seem the most viable option.[61]

Worsening matters are modern Western assumptions and defences that work in the service of the just world delusion. There are common presumptions that society is engaged in a journey of progress, that its citizens are agentic, rational actors, and that vulnerability is largely a thing of the past (or of other countries). These implicit beliefs were arguably at their peak in the nineties (the decade thought by some to be 'the end of history'), around the time that victims and survivors, on back of the gains of the feminist movement, were just gaining the confidence to speak out (Scott, 2001). Their testimonies were (and still are) a direct challenge to these delusions, and the discourse of disbelief can be clearly read as the powerful resistance they evoke. It is not only that accounts of ritualistic abuse involve gross injustice and cruelty, they also point to the ongoing power of ritual for humans in a postmodern society that is largely committed to seeing such things as a product of more 'primitive' times and cultures.[62] In the discourse of disbelief, there is an undercurrent of pleasure visible, as the threat of ritual abuse is pushed back, and a hegemonic status quo is re-asserted in which marginal voices are again held in suspicion (Salter, 2008b; 2013a).

When evidence of atrocity, tragedy and gross injustice comes to light, societies and communities need the resources to respond and make sense of them in ways that are adaptive. They need ways to come together to grieve, to honour those injured, and to develop preventative responses with the aspiration of 'never again'. But all of this is blocked by disavowal, which instead keeps in place the circumstances through which these abuses can instead happen 'many times again'. The disavowal of ritual abuse is underpinned by a broader denial of 'tragedy, loss and vulnerability as inevitable features of human existence' (Salter, 2019, p.24), and so if we are to develop a social context which can face and respond well to it, we need to develop the resources, narratives and conversations for this wider acknowledgement.

61 Other strategies that can act in service of just world thinking are minimisation of the injustice and, as discussed, blaming victims for what happened to them. Neither strategy finds an easy footing here – the power dynamics and cruelty of ritual abuse are too extreme – attempting to narrate it as 'not that bad' or 'the victims had it coming' would rightly provoke scorn. Note however that default disbelief still involves blame and derogation of victims and those aligned with them – but rather than being blamed for the abuse, they are blamed and derogated for thinking that it really happened.

62 However, adding to the complexity here, some of those trying to understand and raise awareness of ritual abuse have zeroed in on the most extreme allegations, and used cults and minority religions such as Satanism and Paganism as their primary frames of reference (Salter, 2008a; Richardson, 2015). Such an approach works against ritual abuse being understood considering all we know about the wider dynamics of abuse and violence, and unnecessarily 'others' it, rendering it strange and 'exotic'. So, some disbelief is an understandable response to these characterisations.

11. Disclosing ritual abuse: barriers and professional responses

As is evident in all that has been discussed so far, survivors of ritual and wider organised abuse face many significant obstacles to disclosure – arguably making this the most shadowed form of abuse. First and foremost, the nature of the abuse leaves victims holding a range of beliefs and feelings which work to hinder them opening up to others (Salter, 2011, 2013b; Schröder, Behrendt et al., 2020b; Scott, 2001; Pacheco et al., 2023), in particular:

- Self-blame and guilt, feelings which are especially entrapping when the abuse involves moral injury
- Shame and self-disgust, and related fears of exposure
- Feelings of loyalty to perpetrators
- Distrust of their feelings or memories (this being further exacerbated if victims were given drugs or alcohol)
- Fear of retaliation from perpetrators (including that they or loved ones will be killed)
- Fear of supernatural forces (especially held by children)
- Fear of disbelief and the invalidation that this entails
- Fear of unravelling if they talk about what happened (it feels too overwhelming to do so)
- The experience of their abuse being fragmented in their mind and 'beyond words'

Furthermore, Dissociative Amnesia and Dissociative Identity Disorder (at times interacting with perpetrators' attempts to make their victims forget) mean that many survivors (or the parts of them interacting in the world) do not remember their abuse for long periods.

Children are likely to be held hostage by perpetrators' threats and narratives to a much greater degree than adult survivors, having few if any other reference points to make sense of their life, and existing under such high levels of threat with such little power. They also have few options of who to disclose to. Given all this, it is unsurprising that disclosures from adult survivors are far more prevalent, and that those children who do disclose have often already been taken into care (for other forms of maltreatment such as neglect).

Some beliefs and emotions work against some forms of disclosure more than others – for example, disclosing anonymously (say to helplines or researchers) or where high levels of confidentiality are demonstrated (say in therapy) can help to avoid a number of risks (Matthew & Barron, 2015). But in these contexts, the nature of victims' and survivors' memories and all the emotions they hold may still constrict what they are able to share, as these two participants in Salter's (2013b) research demonstrate:

> "In absolute terror, uh, clutch- clutching a sibling, when the, when this monster who was someone that you normally loved and trusted would be parading around the bedroom saying, 'where are you? COME OUT!' and um, um, I'm just having a little bit of trouble divulging here, because I don't want to go too far."
>
> Jane quoted in Salter (2013b)

> I find it really hard to put things in language and context half the time. It's just this messy imagery, sensory... sometimes it feels like there are twenty different events all connected in one... it's unravelling this messy... you know how cats play with balls of wool? And they get them all knotted up and messy? Sometimes you can't unmessy it, it's beyond repair. That's what it feels like in our head, sometimes
>
> Isabelle quoted in Salter (2013b)

The threat and reality of disbelief looms large in survivors' accounts (Matthew & Barron, 2015; Pacheco et al., 2023; Salter, 2011; 2013b). Survivors are highly attuned to the discourse of disbelief, and many are terrified of the impact that people's disbelief would have on them, compounding as it would the invalidation of their abuse. The journey on from the abuse involves giving validity and worth to their thoughts, feelings and memories, and disbelief (especially from those in societal systems) challenges this, confirming what was impressed upon them as a child: that they are bad, wrong, untrustworthy and unworthy of being taken seriously (Salter, 2013b). Sadly, many report this experience – in a Scottish online survey of 58 survivors of ritual abuse and 10 people that supported them, 60 reported being disbelieved when seeking help, despite the belief of others being a primary need that many held (Matthew & Baron, 2015). Most reported a bad experience or view of statutory services, with the worst ratings given to health and social services – each was rated by 87% of participants as 'particularly poor'.

> We face denial and disbelief on a scale that beggars belief. They can't handle our abuse at all, but they don't have to, they just have to listen, but they don't.
>
> Survivor quoted in Matthew & Barron (2015)

Some survivors report being advised not to mention ritual aspects to their abuse, or making this decision themselves, in an attempt to receive at least some support or justice:

> I've been advised by several people not to mention it, because the minute you do, you're basically unwell, rather than a survivor. If it's not there, they don't have to set anything up to deal with it, they don't really want to stir up a hornet's nest. So it's much easier to pretend it's not there.
>
> Survivor quoted in Matthew & Barron (2015)

> I was fully aware that a lawyer standing up in court saying 'we have a survivor of child sexual abuse here' was treated very differently to one who said 'we have a survivor of ritual abuse here'. I just couldn't risk it.
>
> Matthew (2012)

Default disbelief and the practices that follow from it – such as withholding of support, lack of investigation, denigration, and oppressive mental health 'treatment' (Pacheco et al., 2023) – exert deep harm and injustice on survivors, as the following accounts testify to:

> The psychiatrist I went to see, he summed me up within ten, fifteen minutes. He'd turned around and basically told me I was crazy, and I was a victim of… 'false memory syndrome'. He'd likened me to some nutcase that thought he was a serial killer. Yeah, he really just said, out and out, 'you are a crazy man'… It's just hard for me to even think about, it was one of the worst things that has ever – just, I'd wanted to, I'd been waiting to get enough money to see this guy, and I'd pinned a lot of hopes on being able to talk to this fellow. Because I'd actually talked to him before… and he'd seemed like basically a decent sort of guy. But then, he just nailed me. I walked out of that place so – I hadn't been that suicidal in years.
>
> Darren quoted in Salter (2013b)

> When I started with a new therapist and started to remember ritual abuse she didn't believe me. I was devastated. It is hard enough trying to cope with some of these very extreme memories without having professionals disbelieve.
>
> Survivor quoted in Matthew & Barron (2015)

Salter (2013b) describes an 'irreconcilable gap' in the lives of many of his research participants 'between the severity of the abuses they had witnessed and been subject to, and the ways in which these abuses were denied public representation and acknowledgement'. This failure of people, systems, and society as a whole to acknowledge their experiences perfectly synced with childhoods in which their thoughts, feelings and experiences had been ignored, denied and inverted. It deepened feelings of worthlessness and subordination, and led to a sense of profound alienation, invisibility and hopelessness.

Most of the survivors interviewed in Matthew and Barron's (2015) felt that the backlash of the 1980s and 1900s was responsible for discrediting ritual abuse, and a number reflected on the fears that as a result professionals felt in the face of these disclosures: 'lots of workers get scared when they hear about it… workers are also scared of the media and what might happen if they hear'; 'There is so much fear around this. Workers fear for their jobs, professionals for their reputations, and me for my life'. Indeed, professionals interviewed by Salter (2019) described how they felt a pressure to not name this abuse, but instead to support these survivors under other headings – they had been led to fear that naming it and the complexities inherent to it would risk their credibility and funding. So they were in the ironic situation of only being able to support ritual abuse survivors if they did not call them ritual abuse survivors.

> So you water down, and water down, and water down your language, but we have… a stranger element… a darker element of what we have to deal with and what comes to the fore in other services that are dealing with, you know, domestic violence. Yet it all falls under the same framework.
>
> Maryanne, manager of sexual assault service, quoted by Salter (2019)

The ongoing silence serves to then perpetuate the disbelief in a vicious spiral – the less it is acknowledged, the less practitioners can be open and understanding when survivors do disclose, in turn shutting them down and keeping the abuse hidden. This situation worsens further if the abuse is still ongoing: Salter's (2017) interviews with individuals experiencing this and professionals involved in the support of this group revealed a system ill-prepared to intervene protectively – a picture confirmed by wider research (McMaugh et al., 2024b).

A systemic refusal to acknowledge this abuse and deal with its complexities meant that victims were left to fend for themselves, whilst the evidence of the abuse was misconstrued to undermine their credibility and feed the discourse of disbelief (for example, injuries seen as self-harm and dissociative coping as consent).

> "It's my experience generally, the worse the abuse, the worse the system's response... The more severe the abuse, the more likely the system isn't going to be able to manage it. And the response will then turn on the client."
>
> Charlotte, social worker quoted by Salter (2017)

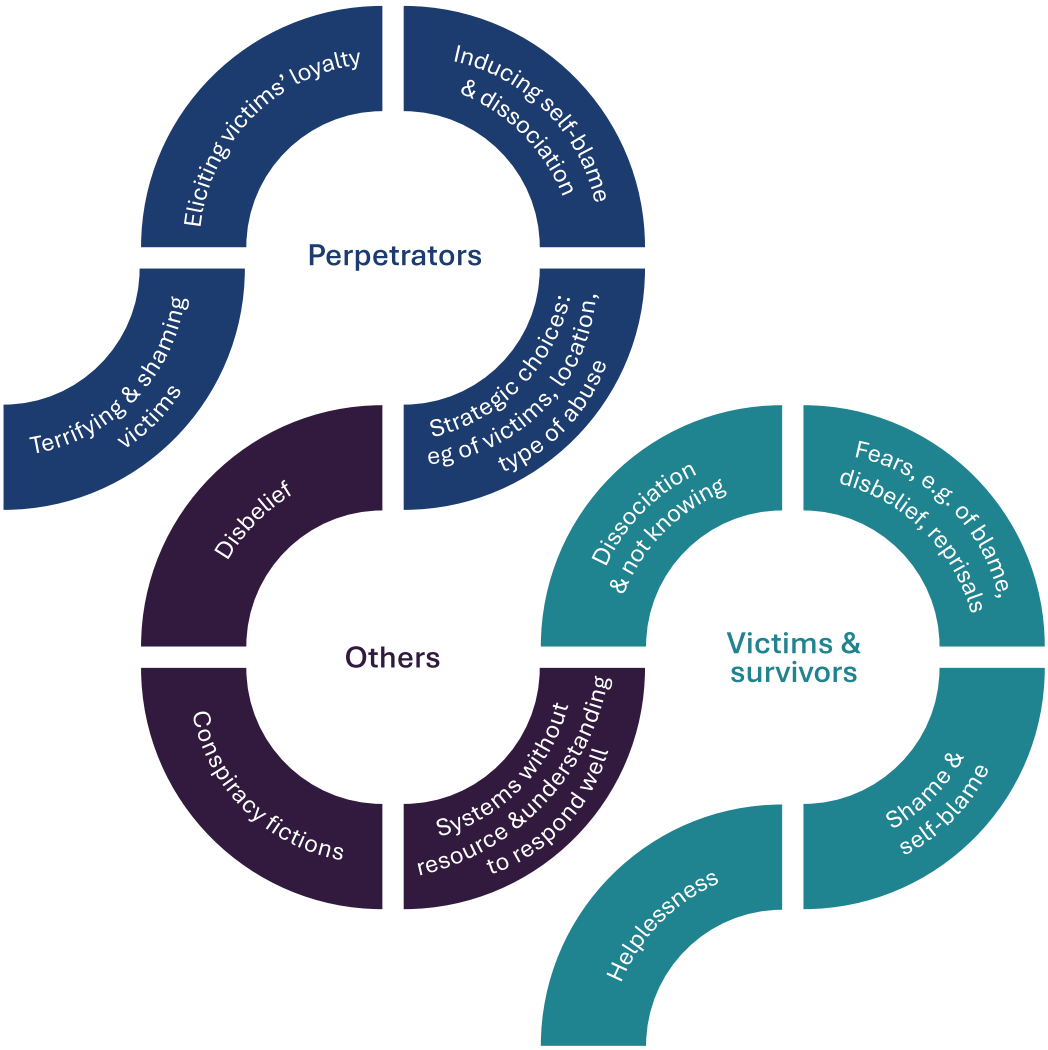


Figure 1: Some key factors that work to prevent ritual abuse coming to light.
As will be clear, responsibility for these factors lies with perpetrators and society. Inspired by a similar figure that formed part of J. Schröder's (2020) poster contribution at the 26th Scientific Conference of the German Society for Sexual Research (DGfS).

12. Ways forward: recommendations for prevention and effective responses

Ritual abuse and the abuses that surround it are atrocities demanding urgent, robust and thoughtful action – action that works to prevent these crimes continuing, and that supports wider safety alongside healing and justice.[63] The understanding of ritual abuse and its wider context laid out in this report suggest a wide array of practices that would help to achieve these aims, ranging from foundational shifts that achieve broad change to approaches specific to ritual abuse, and spanning those that make demands of us all to new practices for specific professions. These recommended actions include the following:[64]

- Trauma-informed practice should be embedded within organisations, professions and teams that often work with survivors of abuse and/or where there is particular risk of trauma-related harm, for example: mental healthcare; wider healthcare (in particular, General Practitioners, Accident & Emergency departments, and Obstetrics and Gynaecology); child protection and other social care; policing (including child abuse investigation teams and first responders) and other parts of the criminal justice system; therapy; and education. At its heart, this practice is one that seeks to avoid further traumatization and to support safety and healing. It flows from a nuanced understanding of the nature and impact of abuse and other traumas, and it involves authentic relating and trustworthiness, curiosity and openness, compassion and empowerment.[65]
- Training of these organisations, teams and professional groups should sit alongside – this should both teach the knowledge and skills for general trauma-informed practice and develop a specific understanding of complex trauma and dissociation (including DID and organised abuse). Guidance documents should be revised or developed to reflect this understanding.
- Disclosures of organised and/or ritual abuse should be met with open and informed belief. Such a stance is that with which we meet other accounts of lived experience (for example, if someone reports being a victim of burglary) and is clearly distinguishable from belief which is ideological, i.e. a belief made possible by selective attention or the suspense of reason and logic.66 Just as with other reports, there will of course be situations in which this approach shifts to disbelief as a wider picture emerges (such as in the Hampstead case, and just as a report of burglary could turn out to be insurance fraud). This approach of taking disclosures seriously is warranted and affords survivors the validation, safety and everyday interpersonal trust that they so profoundly need and merit.

63 These terms – safety, healing and justice – are all being thought of here in their broadest sense. For example, justice can involve many different things for survivors, including perpetrators being punished and held to account; healing from the abuse; having a voice that contributes to change; and much more besides. For a discussion of each of fundamental aspirations – safety, healing and justice – and how they interrelate see Hanson (2024) (albeit in relation to a different form of abuse and harm).

64 This list provides examples of changes that I envisage making a significant difference, but it is by no means exhaustive. They have the UK context in focus, but many are applicable to other countries and regions. Note that they closely interrelate: achieving one helps to achieve others.

65 For more information on trauma-informed practice see https://napac.org.uk/trauma-informed-practice-what-it-is-and-why-napac-supports-it/, and for an example of trauma-informed practice being developed in a workforce see https://visibleproject.org.uk.

66 https://www.hydrantprogramme.co.uk/latest-news/why-belief-matters

Furthermore, via many routes it fosters safety, justice and healing (to take but one example: this stance is a solid basis for a victim-engaged investigation, and in turn this can lead to criminal conviction and/or disruption of the crime; Patterson, 2011). Especially when this approach is adopted by people within 'the system' (for example, mental health professionals, police and social workers) it has the power to counter the deep societal alienation that this abuse so frequently leaves survivors with. I am aware of no evidence that it increases the risk of false convictions, and as discussed, it is of a very different nature than belief in conspiracy fictions.

- Awareness raising across society will help to foster a climate in which survivors feel safer to disclose and are met with support and validation when they do. Many across society could be usefully involved in these efforts, including charities, survivors and their supporters, academics and the like. The media should play a pivotal role here, helping to undo the damage of the disbelief discourse that it has historically done so much to embed. Journalists should reflect on power and voice (whose voices have they given a platform to and why?) and work towards ethically bringing the unheard voices of victims and survivors to the fore. In addition, awareness raising efforts should be mindful of the harms caused by conspiracy fictions and so work to ensure that messaging does not inadvertently play into or collude with these.
- It is widely acknowledged that there is much to be done across society to better hear children's distress, see their maltreatment, and act when we do. The broad suite of actions required here will help to bring children of organised and/or ritual abuse into safety (even when this is not disclosed, other forms of abuse or neglect may be better identified and acted upon). As part of this, key groups (teachers, nursery workers, social workers, health professionals) should receive guidance, including on how to follow-up concerns with purposeful conversations that 'open doors for children' (supporting them to disclose if there is something they wish to) whilst avoiding harmful practices, such as leading or shutting them down (Marchant et al., 2021).
- The nature of this crime and its impact demands a policing approach that integrates relevant practice from varied police teams, for example those concerned with organised crime, child sexual abuse, sexual violence, domestic abuse (often termed public protection), homicide and professional standards (anti-corruption). Approaches to investigation, disruption and prosecution need to be developed that do not depend on identified victims closely engaging with police, given the extent of the barriers they face. For example, routes should be available for people to anonymously provide information about organised abuse, and there should be the resource and means for this intelligence to be scoped and acted upon as appropriate. Systems should be in place that enable patterns and indicators of organised abuse to be identified and investigated. Police should also be able to investigate based on credible third-party reports (for example from therapists) and focus on disruption versus prosecution, especially when the prospect of conviction is out of reach. Victimless prosecutions might also be considered for this crime type.
- Where victims can engage with the police, practice must be deeply informed by an understanding of the impact of this abuse, and the needs and complexities that flow from this. For example, when a survivor has DID, they may need to provide their evidence from different parts of themselves, and they should be supported to do so in ways that are empowering versus traumatising. Equally, if they give an inconsistent account, impact-related reasons for this must be considered and explored (such as a dissociative part loyal to the perpetrators undermining the others, or an episode of reliving being experienced as current abuse).
- Police, social care and other relevant organisations should have in place processes by which they can learn from past cases (involving either good or poor practice). If large scale abuse comes to light, the lessons from Operation Jericho in Canada will be important to apply as appropriate.

- The system for dealing with missing people requires substantial revision considering its problematic dependence on reporting by family members. Similarly, the processes for registering children's births and home schooling must shift to address their current weaknesses – these render vulnerable, abused children invisible to those that would otherwise seek to protect them.
- Legislation should be reviewed considering the complexities of this crime. Many victims do not report ritual abuse fearing their own prosecution, and the law may require revision to better protect them from this where this would be unjust. And new crimes that specifically relate to the ritual and deception elements of the crime should be considered (for example, a crime of using costumes to terrorise children and facilitate abuse). As discussed, such acts heighten the severity of the abuse, yet there appears to be a practice of omitting them from court cases (in part because they do not currently map onto specific crimes), and this works to further entrench the discourse of disbelief and all its harms.
- There is good reason to argue that effective therapeutic support for victims and survivors of this abuse is that which is long-term, relational, phased (attending to both safety and trauma processing), and which works with dissociative self-states where relevant (Brand et al., 2012; Brand et al., 2016). Such therapy is not widely available, and this injustice should be urgently addressed through appropriate funding, commissioning frameworks, training, supervision arrangements, and therapy guidance. Naturally therapeutic approaches that involve any assumptions, leading or suggestion must be clearly cautioned against given the risks they can pose.
- Many victims and survivors would benefit from peer-support, but this often is out of reach, not least due to fears of triggering, suggestion, and overwhelm. Charities and survivor-led initiatives could usefully develop helpful and ethical frameworks and forums for this.
- Multi-agency approaches need to be developed that can effectively tackle ongoing abuse in adulthood. Bringing such abuse to a close is a complex endeavour that could usefully involve therapy, police disruption approaches, social care, and options for safer housing.

In sum, these actions whilst by no means comprehensive are a solid starting point to building a society hostile to ritual abuse and caring of its victims and survivors.

When we are faced with all that has been shared about the abhorrent crimes discussed in this report, we are faced with a choice: do we stay with this knowledge and allow it to change us, or do we turn away: apply illogically high thresholds of belief or simply forget and blend into society's ongoing disavowal. As Herman (1992) writes, 'it is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering'.

Here then is the invitation: for us to know, to feel and to act, holding close our curiosity and thoughtfulness, our compassion and our courage.

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About the Hydrant Programme

HYDRANT PROGRAMME
Supporting child protection and abuse investigation

The Hydrant Programme is a national policing programme supporting the work of the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) Child Protection and Abuse Investigation Working Group.

Originally established in 2014 to coordinate the response to non-recent child sexual abuse, but now supporting forces across all child protection and abuse investigation issues.

Hydrant develops policy and strategy on behalf of the NPCC, develops and delivers best practice advice including a learning, review and improvement function, provides a strategic analysis capability and partnership engagement with key stakeholders and partners.

Hydrant Programme LinkedIn: **www.linkedin.com/company/the-hydrant-programme**

Hydrant Programme YouTube: **www.youtube.com/@TheHydrantProgramme**

Website: **www.hydrantprogramme.co.uk**

About NAPAC

NAPAC is the National Association for People Abused in Childhood and provides the only free national support service for adult survivors of all types of childhood abuse. They offer specialist, confidential support to all adult survivors of any type of abuse, operated by experienced staff and trained volunteers.

As a trusted support service, survivors engage with NAPAC to disclose childhood abuse, to be heard and comforted, and to be able to make brave, positive choices every day – including asking for help when they need it.

Those using NAPAC's services ask for support with a range of concerns, including anxiety, depression, isolation, reporting to the police, domestic and sexual violence, boundaries, and complex post-traumatic stress. For many, contacting NAPAC is a first step to recovering from trauma and leading happier, more fulfilled lives.

NAPAC has three main areas of focus:

- They run the UK's only free national telephone and email support service for all adult survivors of any kind of childhood abuse
- They provide extensive training for professionals who engage with adult survivors of childhood abuse and anyone at risk of vicarious trauma
- They conduct research and advocacy, using unique data and working in partnership to raise survivors' voices in policy and practice across the UK

NAPAC Facebook: **www.facebook.com/NationalAssociationforPeopleAbusedinChildhood/**

NAPAC LinkedIn: **www.linkedin.com/company/napac/**

NAPAC Twitter/ X: **www.twitter.com/NAPAC**

NAPAC Instagram: **www.instagram.com/napac.uk/**

Website: **www.napac.org.uk**

Notes