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**‘Recent  
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**‘Victims of organised  
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# The Role of Ritual in the Organised Abuse of Children

Over the last 30 years, allegations of ritual child sexual abuse have emerged from child protection cases and legal proceedings and from adults and children in psychotherapy. These allegations have been met with disbelief from many practitioners and academics. Children and adults disclosing ritual abuse continue to present in a range of circumstances and recent substantiations of ritual abuse allegations call for a grounded analysis of their claims. This paper is based on qualitative interviews with 16 adults who described experiencing ritual abuse in childhood. They described the ways in which sexually abusive groups generated shared rationales of religious or mythological justifications for organised abuse. Participants were forced to internalise these rationales in degrading and dehumanising ordeals, whereupon they became active in facilitating their own abuse and/or the abuse of others. Ritual abuse can therefore be conceptualised as a device or strategy that enjoins the participation of victims in organised abuse whilst simultaneously accomplishing exculpation for perpetrators. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- Ritual abuse can be understood as a strategy that legitimises sexual exploitation to victims and perpetrators of organised abuse.
- Children and adults subject to ritual abuse may actively collude in their own victimisation, complicating efforts at detection, intervention and treatment.
- Practitioners should consider the ways in which ritual abuse reflects common rationalisations for sexual crimes that assign blame and responsibility to victims.

KEY WORDS: ritual abuse; organised abuse; sexual abuse; child abuse

The organised abuse of children is defined by La Fontaine (1993) as any circumstance in which one or more minors are sexually abused by two or more adults acting in concert, where at least one adult is not residing in the same household as the child or is not a member of the same family. Child protection data suggest that organised abuse is a rare form of child abuse (Creighton, 1993; Gallagher *et al.*, 1996; Wild, 1989), although surveys and case reviews of adults and children in clinical settings find that victims of organised abuse present with more frequency in mental health settings (Briere, 1988; Gold *et al.*, 1996; McClellan *et al.*, 1995). Children and adults reporting

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experiences of sexual abuse by multiple perpetrators are more likely to report earlier initiation of abuse, more frequent incidents of abuse, a longer period of abuse, the use of force/threats/drugs and greater severity of abuse (Casey and Nurius, 2005; Finkelhor and Williams, 1988; Long and Jackson, 1991), and this is particularly the case where organised abuse is reported. In their analysis of organised abuse cases reported to British child protection authorities in the early 1990s, Gallagher *et al.* (1996, p. 227) described organised abuse as rare but extreme, including exposure to 'bizarre or sadistic practices, such as being forced to eat excrement, and bestiality'.

An unusual practice associated with organised abuse is 'ritual abuse' in which adults sexually abuse children in a ritualistic or ceremonial way (McFadyen *et al.*, 1993). Disclosures of ritual abuse first came to prominence in the 1980s in the context of child protection investigations and later from children and adults in psychotherapy (Hechler, 1988). The evidence base for ritual abuse is complex, including successful convictions in child sex prosecutions where ritual abuse was alleged, and a range of studies documenting long-term and serious psychological harm amongst children and adults disclosing organised and ritual abuse (for a summary, see Noblitt and Perskin, 2000, chapter 6). In recent years, ritual abuse has been substantiated in criminal investigations in North America (for newspaper reports, see Gyan, 2010; Lemoine, 2008a, 2008b), the UK and Europe (de Bruxelles, 2011; Kelly, 1998), and it has been documented in African and European child trafficking networks (International Organization of Migration, 2001). A recent resurgence in publications on ritual abuse highlights that adults and children are continuing to disclose ritual abuse in a variety of settings (Epstein *et al.*, 2011; Noblitt and Perskin-Noblitt, 2008; Sachs and Galton, 2008; Sarson and MacDonald, 2008).

There is a significant disjunction between the views of those professionals working directly with clients disclosing ritual abuse and those of many academics and journalists writing on the issue. Surveys of mental health practitioners in Britain, the US and Australia indicate that a significant minority of mental health practitioners have encountered one or more clients disclosing ritual abuse and the majority of these take such reports seriously (Andrews *et al.*, 1995; Bottoms *et al.*, 1996; Schmuttmaier and Veno, 1999). In contrast, the existence of ritual abuse has been robustly contested by sceptical journalists and academics who have argued that most, if not all, allegations of ritual abuse are the product of 'moral panic', 'false memories' and community 'hysteria' about sexual abuse (e.g. Guilliatt, 1996; Loftus and Ketcham, 1994; Ofshe and Watters, 1996). In criminological and sociological literature, the sceptical account of ritual abuse has proven most influential, and pejorative references to allegations of ritual abuse as lacking substance or credibility are now a mainstay of writings on 'moral panic' (e.g. Cohen, 2005; Garland, 2008; Jenkins, 1992). Ritual abuse is also frequently cited in psychological literature as an example of 'false memories' (Davis and Loftus, 2009; McNally and Geraerts, 2009).

These forceful assertions that allegations of ritual abuse are confabulated need to be reconsidered in light of the substantiation of ritualistic sexual practices in recent child sex prosecutions. However, the mental health literature on ritual abuse has struggled to develop a coherent explanation for the role of ritual in organised abuse. Goodwin's (1994) critique of the focus of this literature on cults and perverse religiosity, rather than issues of sexuality, violence

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**‘Reflections on their experience of the interview suggested that they valued the opportunity to speak openly’**

and power, remains as relevant today as it was in the mid-1990s. This paper will draw on life history interviews with 16 adults who described ritual abuse in childhood in order to develop a theoretical model of ritual abuse that is grounded in the experience of survivors, and in sociological theories of social and ritual practice. The qualitative methodology of the project not only serves an important criminological purpose in documenting adult accounts of ritual abuse, but it also provides a theoretical alternative to the ‘moral panic’ and ‘false memory’ claims that have dominated both academic and popular coverage of the issue.

### **The Qualitative Study**

In 2008, recruitment notes were circulated through counselling agencies and the newsletters and mailing lists of organisations in the fields of mental health, sexual assault, sexual abuse and child protection. These notes invited individuals over the age of 18 with a history of organised abuse (‘forms of sexual abuse involving multiple perpetrators and multiple victims’) to contact the researcher if they would like to be interviewed about their experiences. It was a prerequisite of participation that participants had or were accessing mental healthcare, and that they had a caring person in their life that knew about their history of abuse and could support them during or after the interview if need be. In all, 21 people were recruited to the project, including 16 women and five men. Sixteen participants described ritual abuse, and this paper is based on an analysis of their interview transcripts.

Research that involves adults disclosing sexual abuse raises complex ethical issues. Ethics approval for the project was obtained in 2007 from the Human Ethics Research Committee at the University of New South Wales (project no. 07264). Survivors of sexual abuse are rarely engaged in qualitative research, perhaps out of concern that they may experience distress in interview (DePrince and Freyd, 2004), although such adverse responses to trauma research are rare (Becker-Blease and Freyd, 2006). This project proceeded with a strong commitment to the safety and wellbeing of research participants, as well as to the principle of autonomy (i.e. that a history of sexual abuse does not abrogate a person’s capacity to provide informed consent). Participants were provided with detailed information about the project and a range of options regarding the format and setting of the interview in order to maximise their sense of comfort and security. All interview transcripts were anonymised and pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to refer to research participants. Participants’ reflections on their experience of the interview suggested that they valued the opportunity to speak openly and without reserve about their life. As May said:

‘I do have to be careful with the ritual abuse stuff, because – as you know – not many people can handle it. That’s why it’s nice talking to you, because you are probably the only person who can cope with being told about this stuff. Because, you know, 98% of the population can’t. And they’ll react defensively and angrily and deny your reality.’

The interviews were based on the life history method, which involves semi-structured interviews in which participants are invited to speak about their lives from childhood to the present day (Plummer, 1983). The interviews were designed to elicit a rich and textured narrative from participants as they reflected

on their life and the meanings they associate with specific events, and as such it was not designed to be a forensic, clinical or legalistic interview. This approach is grounded in the belief that a position of 'objectivity' in qualitative research is neither achievable nor ideal. The interview was understood in this project as an encounter in which knowledge is produced by an interaction between the interviewer and participant, rather than the elucidation of pre-existing data from the participant by an aloof 'expert'. This relational approach to the interview encounter is more likely to foster a sense of mutuality and rapport between interviewer and interviewee, which is important in research with traumatised populations (Campbell, 2002; Denborough, 2006).

Data analysis was based on the principles of grounded theory in which 'data collection and analysis occur in alternating sequences' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 41). The validity of qualitative research is based on the depth and richness of the interview data, the rigor of the analysis and the integration of the research findings with the existing evidence base, rather than on criterion such as representativeness and statistical reliability upon which the validity of quantitative research is assessed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Hence, the data gathered in this study do not represent the experiences of all people reporting ritual abuse, but rather the research findings provide a theoretical model that may be transferrable across circumstances and situations.

A common objection to the validity of qualitative research is 'How do you know that the research participants are telling the truth?' Kvale (1994, p. 154) lists this question amongst the 'standard objections to qualitative research'. It is not possible to test the factual accuracy of the events recounted by qualitative research participants, and all forms of research – qualitative and quantitative – may be impacted upon by memory errors or false reporting. However, there is no evidence that people prone to confabulation or memory error are particularly likely to volunteer for participation in qualitative research, nor is there any evidence that such an individual would be particularly likely to volunteer for research into sexual abuse.

In considering the findings of this project, it is important to be mindful of the effect of time and trauma on recollections of abuse. Nonetheless, as the investigation progressed, the author gained confidence in the accuracy of participants' accounts. Each interview had the detail, vividness and emotional intensity of well-preserved memory, and the interviews contained a number of underlying themes and common experiences that tended to validate one another. The general picture that emerged from the life histories gathered in this project has been documented by other researchers studying ritual abuse, organised abuse and other forms of violence against women and children. Nonetheless, this project has been exploratory in scope and focus. Rather than providing a definitive account of ritual abuse, it has highlighted a range of issues that require further research, as will be outlined in the Conclusion.

## Discussion

Of 21 participants describing organised abuse in this study (Salter, 2012), 16 (13 women and three men, including a transgendered man) described experiences of ritual abuse in which they were sexually abused by groups of adults in a ceremonial or ritualistic fashion. In this study, as in others (Cook, 1991; Sarson and MacDonald, 2008; Scott, 2001), ritual abuse was just one practice

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of abusive groups who were also involved in the manufacture of child abuse images, child prostitution and other forms of organised abuse. In participants’ descriptions of their childhoods, a multiplicity of experiences of abuse, exploitation and violence clustered around their ritual abuse. Abuse and violence at home was a common experience for participants, and the majority reported that one or both of their parents actively facilitated their ritual abuse. A number of participants also reported sexual abuse at school, including a few participants who were subject to ritual abuse by an extra-familial perpetrator such as a teacher or priest. Sexual abuse was so ubiquitous in the childhoods of participants that they described it as an expected and mundane aspect of their lives as children. In Kate’s words, ‘It was something to put up with, like eating overcooked cabbage, you know?’

Whilst sexual abuse was a frequent experience in participants’ childhoods, ritual abuse was set apart from other experiences of abuse by elevated levels of fear and terror. The theology and practices of ritual abuse often involve a ‘B-movie’ version of Satanism, described by Scott (2001, p. 9) as a ‘tawdry occultism’ that makes even the hardened researcher or counsellor cringe. The gap between the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ view of ritual abuse is considerable. Lauren identified this gap when she said:

‘With victims, 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.’

**‘Ritually abusive groups draw from a range of existing ritualistic traditions in the course of harming children’**

Kent (1993a, 1993b) described the misuse of ritualistic practices within organised abuse as ‘deviant scripturalism’, noting that ritually abusive groups draw from a range of existing ritualistic traditions in the course of harming children. Those participants subject to ritual abuse reported that their abuse included references to a range of religious or metaphysical ideologies, particularly Christianity, Satanism and Freemasonry. Participants described how sexually abusive families and groups overlapped with religious institutions or fraternal organisations, and the surreptitious connections that abusive men made with one another in these otherwise mainstream contexts. In their practice of organised abuse, perpetrators appeared to adopt and invert the ritualistic traditions of larger organisations. Participants described themselves as living in ‘two worlds’ as children, with ostensibly benevolent religious and fraternal institutions and ideologies enmeshed in sadistic and bizarre abuse. Sky wondered whether the ‘satanic’ ritual practices he was subject to as a child arose out of the tradition of masculine domination in religious communities, and the theological associations between femininity, sexuality and evil:

‘I wonder whether the inverted Christian stuff is just . . . if you have an extreme Christian background, and you want to have sex, and you are raised not to have a lot of empathy for women and children – maybe that’s how you justify it to yourself, that’s how you form your sexuality, that’s how you justify it to the kids. And then you come to believe it? I don’t know.’

**‘Participants responded using similar gendered dichotomies’**

The specific circumstances from which ritual abuse emerged varied from participant to participant, but when they were asked to elaborate on the beliefs of the abusive groups, participants responded using similar gendered dichotomies: evil/good, masculine/feminine, powerful/powerless, dark/light, Satanism/Christianity.



'In the torture sessions, there were always short simple things like 'Satan is good', 'God is evil', 'Jesus is evil', 'evil is good', 'good is evil'. That sort of thing.' (Seb)

'There was this thing about needing to do good so you can do evil. So there was a belief about balance, and balancing good with evil.' (Polly)

'So you are actually put in positions of having to make choices between good and bad, Satan, God, light, dark, you know.' (Lily)

Whilst the particularities of the group *mythos* described by participants varied, they had in common a Manichean worldview in which ritual abuse featured as a necessary practice in a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Subject positions within this melodrama were somewhat fluid. At times, the perpetrators adopted a hyper-masculine braggadocio, characterising ritual abuse as a metaphysical act of domination. May described the ethos of the group that ritually abused her in the following terms: 'We are God, the masters of the universe, so we are entitled to do whatever we wish. We need to overcome our petty moral human standards which the world has imposed on us.' In these instances, ritual sexual violence appeared to be viewed by perpetrators as a transgressive practice through which men could lay claim to a transcendental self-identity and accrue experiences of status and power.

Other participants described perpetrators adopting a victimised posture and construing women and girls as the aggressors in a ritual context. In such circumstances, it seemed that perpetrators proffered co-perpetration by battered spouses or victimised children as evidence of women's and girls' desire to be abused and to abuse others. For example, Lauren was subject to organised and ritual abuse by her mother and her mother's extended family. Lauren stated that the abusive group claimed to venerate women above men in an attempt to invert the patriarchal order prescribed by mainstream religions. However, Lauren indicated that the supposed 'matriarchy' of the abusive group was 'a major deceit', commenting that 'Other than for show, they [girls and women] aren't in control.' Lauren described the men in the abusive group as 'nose-out-of-joint aggro', violently coercing their spouses and children into organised abuse, whereupon the complicity of battered women in the sexual exploitation of their children was mythologised as an expression of women's power and domination. This mirrors Scott's (2001, p. 130) observation that, in the accounts of the ritual abuse survivors she interviewed, '[a] more everyday discourse of 'subordinated femininity' in which women's place was prone or at home and which demanded obedience to father or husband coexisted with their ritual elevation'. In Lauren's experience, the ritual elevation of women within organised abuse enabled men to manipulate victimised girls and women, turn them against one another and control their reproductive capacities.

'Girls get it worse than the boys. They do, because the girls are the ones that they really want to control. Because they know that, if they've got control of the girl by the time she's a woman, then they've got the next generation. And that woman will just turn her back and not worry about her own children. So it's paramount that they really, really control her from a young age.'

Some participants recalled how ritual abuse was represented to them as a necessary practice undertaken for their benefit. Within this rationale, perpetrators projected responsibility for their abuses to the child by claiming that her bad qualities forced them to abuse her. They portrayed sexual abuse as the only

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reasonable response to moral inferiority of the victim, whilst claiming that the child could overcome her negativities, and indeed find purpose and meaning, if she cooperated with their treatment of her. Alex's ritual abuse persisted over many years and she recalled:

'[In the abusive group] it was like everyone else – the majority of people – were 'good' [except me] – it was like a good and evil comic book thing. Yeah, it was like a comic book. I was the evil that the rest of the world is trying to fight.'

The ways in which ritual abuse was used to legitimise sexual exploitation were not discrete in participants' accounts, but rather coalesced throughout their stories and experiences in complex, and often bewildering, ways. Perpetrators could lay claim to a transcendental masculinity by asserting a patriarchal right of access to victim's bodies, even whilst characterising those bodies as empty or contaminated vessels that could only achieve redemption through compliance to sexual exploitation. These myriad rationalisations left participants feeling confused, uncertain and disorientated. They spoke of trying to cooperate, 'be good' or make their abusers proud, although uncertain of the terms upon which this could be achieved.

'When I was little, I don't know how much was explained to me. When I think of myself when I was very little, my sense is that I just kept doing what I was told to make people proud of me.' (Polly)

'I was confused out of my brain as a kid. There were so many different things, so many extremely different things going on.' (Sky)

'I didn't feel like I was expected to contribute or anything like that. I knew I was expected to cooperate. . . . Nobody was trying to make sense of it. There was no sense about it.' (May)

In this study, whilst the explicit justifications for sexual exploitation expressed through ritual abuse wavered and varied, the effects of these justifications were the same. The practice of ritual abuse served to demonstrate to the child and/or woman that they were deserving of the harms that were being committed against them. This was not formally articulated by the abusive *mythos* inasmuch as it was revealed to victims, and inscribed upon them, in the visceral terms of pain and torture. In participants' accounts of ritual abuse, the abusive group integrated sexual assault and taboo substances into ceremonies of degradation that resulted in the victim internalising a profound sense of shame and dehumanisation. For example, Kate described how vaginal, oral and anal rape were part of a range of sexually abusive practices in the abusive group that included bestiality, the mutilation of animals and the forced ingestion of animal faeces, blood and flesh.

'So they would hurt their own children, then they would hurt the others' [children] as well. And they would use vaginal and oral and anal entry. They also forced – 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. Which I refused. And when they killed the goat, the flesh was warm and they tried to make you eat it. It was horrible.'

Other participants described the incorporation of human waste and other foul substances into ritual abuse. The forced ingestion of faeces, urine and blood are amongst the most frequently reported forms of torture in children's

and adults' reports of ritual abuse (Jones, 1991; Snow and Sorenson, 1990; Waterman *et al.*, 1993). Within traumatic ordeals in which they were forced into contact with death and blood and human waste, participants' views of themselves ultimately came to accord with the view expressed by their abusers. Regardless of the specific ideological content of the *mythos* of abusive groups, the practice of ritual abuse served to constitute the victimised child and/or woman as polluted and undeserving of love or care. The resulting internal sense of *anomie* then bound the child to the abusive group, since he/she had lost his/her sense of communion or belonging to a wider social order.

In participants' accounts, abusive groups encouraged children to internalise and accept their subordinate place by nurturing powerful and narcissistic fantasies. Sky recalled how he had been told it was a privilege to be selected for abuse: 'Like, it's an honour to do things for them, it's an honour to die for them, it's the greatest honour to be picked for them. It's my destiny.' Polly commented: 'I have a feeling that, the abusers almost encourage that narcissism – the belief that the abuse makes you important in some way. That you are the chosen person.' Other participants recalled how these compensatory illusions of status were formalised in the group *mythos* by bestowing upon the child titles such as 'high priestess'. Jo said:

'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.'

By following a process of sustained dehumanisation with the promise of redemption, ritual abuse was an effective strategy in legitimising sexual exploitation to victims and enjoining their active participation in their abuse and the abuse of others. Gaspar and Bibby (1996, p. 50) observed that it is often difficult for investigators of organised abuse to understand 'why children keep going back to be abused, sometimes in the most degrading manner, and why, when away from the offender, they do not disclose.' In this study, participants described how they came to align with their abusers and support their efforts to harm them, since their self-identity had come to depend on organised abuse in important ways. They recalled their active participation in their own abuse, for example, by meeting abusers at a pre-planned time and place, comporting themselves as instructed during abusive ordeals and hiding their injuries from detection and refusing to disclose their abuse.

The enduring power of ritual abuse, as a way of enjoining victims in their own abuse, was illustrated by the seven participants who maintained their involvement in ritual abuse well into adulthood, at which point three participants complied in making their children available for abuse. As an adult, Isabelle fled interstate in an effort to disrupt her connection to her abusive family. This strategy was initially effective, but when her first child was born, Isabelle remembered receiving threatening phone calls in which she was told her children would be harmed if she did not do what she was told. In interview, she suggested that there had been occasions on which she obeyed the demands of the group to provide her children for abuse.

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**'These compensatory illusions of status were formalised in the group *mythos*'**

**'Their self-identity had come to depend on organised abuse in important ways'**

**'She was told her children would be harmed if she did not do what she was told'**



**'She struggled to conceptualise herself as someone deserving of a safe, warm family life'**

**'Jo still struggled with her entrenched belief that her ordeals defined the core of her nature'**

**'Their world had been irrevocably transformed by traumatically inscribed associations between self, shame and contamination'**

'When David was born, I started getting these strange phone calls that I remember. People threatening me about what they would do with David if I didn't comply. About what, I didn't know.'

*So there weren't any explicit instructions in the phone calls?*

'... There were, at times, there were instructions about where to bring him. And there were times ... that happened. But most of the time, it didn't. Like, there were a lot of times, when those phone calls happened, that I used to take him somewhere in hiding. And I would go and stay somewhere where nobody knew where I was.'

It appears that these threatening phone calls could overwhelm Isabelle's commitment to care for and protect her children and resulted in her children being placed at great risk. She described how her safety, and that of her children, was compromised because she struggled to conceptualise herself as someone deserving of a safe, warm family life.

'Home, in the sense of the house that I grew up in, never felt like home. It was more a place – a place where you play pretending. I always had a stronger connection – in the most unsafe, terrifying way possible – it felt more normal to be part of the dark places and chanting and sex and people's eyes and dead things ... ah, that felt more normal than school, or television, or relationships ... I don't know, somehow, that's how vested the roles where, it felt like that was where we belonged.'

In participants' accounts, the memories of pain and humiliation left by ritual ordeals leant an air of inexorability to perpetrators' claims that they had a right to abuse children and/or women, and that their victims wanted and deserved such abuse. Other participants also described how the subordinate identity inscribed upon them through ritual abuse persisted in ways that continued to compromise their health, wellbeing and safety. Many years after her victimisation in ritual abuse has come to an end, Jo still struggled with her entrenched belief that her ordeals defined the core of her nature, whilst the mundane, everyday routine of her life felt like an external 'shell' that lacked authenticity.

'I've been gradually building more and more and more the external of my life, and that's been coming in, instead of just being an external shell. All the 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 kind of filling it all in, but I'm still trying to get rid of this bit in the middle.'

In Jo's experience, 'this bit in the middle' was the disposition that had been inculcated in her through ritual abuse. The visceral pain and dehumanisation that accompanied ritually abusive ordeals leant the *mythos* of the abusive group an enduring corporeality embedded within the very body of the victim. A similar dynamic has been noted in relation to political torture in which physical agony is used to reconstruct the worldview and subjectivity of the victim in ways that affirm the ideology of the torturer (Scarry, 1985). The ways in which participants related to themselves and experienced their world had been irrevocably transformed by traumatically inscribed associations between self, shame and contamination. Participants in this study were able to identify this transformation and work to alter it by pursuing experiences and relationships in which they were constituted as worthy of care, love and protection. Nonetheless, the dispositional changes wrought by ritual abuse persisted in the forms of schemas of perception and cognition that were extremely difficult for participants to rid themselves of entirely.

## Conclusion

This analysis of survivors' accounts of ritual abuse has shown how rituals serve as legitimising practices within organised abuse. In participants' accounts, abusive groups utilised ritual practices to generate a private discourse about the righteous domination of abusive men over women and children, a discourse often marked with references to the 'natural' or 'supernatural' order. In this context, ritualistic practices were not simply a deviant form of religious activity, but rather they served to imbue organised abuse with metaphysical or religious overtones, thereby recasting sexual abuse as a masculine right, even a duty, rather than as a practice of control and power. The internal and private discourses of abusive groups, with their copious mentions of Satan, magical powers and eternal damnation, may appear jarringly naive and even garish to those unfamiliar with the abusive contexts in which they have arisen. However, for victims of ritual abuse, they invoke a metaphysical order in which they are required to submit to further abuse and torture. Within traumatic rituals in which they were forced into contact with a range of taboo substances, participants' views of themselves ultimately came to accord with the view of their abusers. In accordance with the *mythos* of the abusive group, they came to view themselves as polluted and contaminated vessels whose lot was to endure ongoing abuse and violence at the hands of men who claimed a natural or supernatural mandate to do so.

The *mythos* of abusive groups described by participants in this study did not emerge from a vacuum, but rather they appear to be based upon common cultural logics of gender, power and violence. The arguments that victims of sexual violence 'deserve it' or 'ask for it' and that sexual violence is a 'natural' and excusable male urge are not unique to ritual abuse. They are widespread and commonly held social conventions (see Suarez and Gadalla, 2010). In participants' descriptions of ritual abuse, this cultural logic was misrepresented in the abusive *mythos* as a natural or supernatural relation, and it was enforced upon them through degrading ritual ordeals. When viewed from this perspective, ritual abuse may be the practice of a deviant minority but it can be sensibly located within the 'continuum of sexual violence' against children and women (see Kelly, 1988).

From the findings of this study, it would seem that the focus of much of the literature on ritual abuse is misplaced. Sceptics have focused on reports of satanic worship and other bizarre practices reported to occur within ritual abuse, with little consideration to the practical effects of such behaviours upon victims or the more mundane aspects of their narratives. Much of the literature that takes reports of ritual abuse seriously could also be criticised for its emphasis on the ritual symbols and practices of abusive groups. Through their shared interest in the most bizarre aspects of ritual abuse, sceptical and sympathetic authors alike have overlooked the dynamics of gender, age and power that are intensified by ritual abuse, and the similarities between ritual abuse and other forms of sexual violence and exploitation. This paper suggests that ritual sexual abuse is a practice through which some abusive groups indoctrinate children and women into a violently misogynistic worldview in which they feature as fitting objects of abuse and denigration. This highlights the utility of ritual abuse as a strategy in the organised abuse of children and women, and emphasises the ways in which sexual violence can take on complex and diverse forms that nonetheless conform to underlying structures of gender, age and power.

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