Organised Sexual Abuse

Michael Salter

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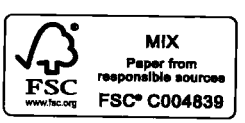

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Introduction

> Batley insisted that no cult existed but the jury found him guilty of 35 offences including 11 rapes, three indecent assaults, causing prostitution for personal gain, causing a child to have sex and inciting a child to have sex. The three women, who got Egyptian Eye of Horus tattoos apparently to show their allegiance to the organisation, were found guilty of sex-related charges.
>
> Young boys and girls were procured by cult members to take part in sex sessions, the trial heard. The group preyed on vulnerable youngsters, impelling them to join with veiled death threats. Batley was accused of forcing a number of his victims into prostitution.
>
> (Morris 2011)

> There are, after all, no paedophile rings; there is no ritual abuse; recovered memories cannot be trusted; not all victimization claims are legitimate.
>
> (Pratt 2009: 70)

Allegations of multi-perpetrator and multi-victim sexual abuse emerged to public awareness in the early 1980s contemporaneously with the denials of the accused and their supporters. Multi-perpetrator sexual offences are typically more sadistic than solo offences and organised sexual abuse is no exception. Adults and children with histories of organised abuse have described lives marked by torturous and sometimes ritualistic sexual abuse arranged by family members and other care-givers and authority figures. It is widely acknowledged, at least in theory, that sexual abuse can take severe forms, but when disclosures of such abuse occur, they are routinely subject to contestation and challenge. People accused of organised, sadistic or ritualistic abuse have protested that their accusers are liars and fantasists, or else innocents led astray by overly zealous investigators. This was an argument that many journalists and academics have found more convincing than the testimony of alleged victims. Today, acknowledgement of the prevalence and harms of child sexual abuse is counterbalanced with cautionary tales about children and women who, under pressure from social workers and therapists, produce false

allegations of 'paedophile rings', 'cult abuse' and 'ritual abuse'. Child protection investigations or legal cases involving allegations of organised child sexual abuse are regularly invoked to illustrate the dangers of 'false memories', 'moral panic' and 'community hysteria'. These cautionary tales effectively delimit the bounds of acceptable knowledge in relation to sexual abuse. They are circulated by those who locate themselves firmly within those bounds, characterising those beyond as ideologues and conspiracy theorists.

However firmly these boundaries have been drawn, they have been persistently transgressed by substantiated disclosures of organised abuse that have led to child protection interventions and prosecutions. Throughout the 1990s, in a sustained effort to redraw these boundaries, investigations and prosecutions for organised abuse were widely labelled 'miscarriages of justice' and workers and therapists confronted with incidents of organised abuse were accused of fabricating or exaggerating the available evidence. These accusations have faded over time as evidence of organised abuse has accumulated, while investigatory procedures have become more standardised and less vulnerable to discrediting attacks. However, as the opening quotes to this introduction illustrate, the contemporary situation in relation to organised abuse is one of considerable ambiguity in which journalists and academics claim that organised abuse is a discredited 'moral panic' even as cases are being investigated and prosecuted.

This vacillation between assertion and denial in discussions about organised abuse can be understood as functional, in that it serves to contain the traumatic kernel at the heart of allegations of organised abuse. In his influential 'just world' theory, Lerner (1980) argued that emotional wellbeing is predicated on the assumption that the world is an orderly, predictable and just place in which people get what they deserve. Whilst such assumptions are objectively false, Lerner argued that individuals have considerable investment in maintaining them since they are conducive to feelings of self-efficacy and trust in others. When they encounter evidence contradicting the view that the world is just, individuals are motivated to defend this belief either by helping the victim (and thus restoring a sense of justice) or by persuading themselves that no injustice has occurred. Lerner (1980) focused on the ways in which the 'just world' fallacy motivates victim-blaming, but there are other defences available to bystanders who seek to dispel troubling knowledge. Organised abuse highlights the severity of sexual violence in the lives of some children and the desire of some adults to inflict considerable, and sometimes irreversible, harm upon the powerless. Such knowledge is so toxic to common presumptions about the orderly nature of society, and the generally benevolent motivations of others, that it seems as though a defensive scaffold of disbelief, minimisation and scorn has been erected to inhibit a full understanding of organised abuse.

Despite these efforts, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in organised abuse and particularly ritualistic abuse (eg Sachs and Galton 2008, Epstein et al. 2011, Miller 2012). It is clear that cases of organised abuse continue to surface in a range of contexts, such as mental health services and child

protection agencies. However, the representations put forth of organised abuse continue to be marked by the traces of disavowal, even amongst those who take allegations of organised abuse seriously. Herman (1992) has observed the 'dual imperative' that shapes the disclosures of sexual abuse survivors, whose desire to disclose and seek help can be thwarted by the impulse to remain silent and thus maintain the comforting fiction that their abuse did not take place. This dual imperative can result in a destabilised and fragmented narrative that is, through its incoherent or 'hysterical' presentation, effectively self-invalidating. A similar dynamic can be detected within some overwrought representations of organised abuse that effectively communicate the distress of victims and their supporters (and the management of vicarious trauma is a serious challenge for professionals in this area) but in a manner that infects their claims with an irrational edge that provokes scepticism and disbelief. Internal to such claims is the tension between the acceptance that organised abuse has occurred and the struggle to explain how or why.

This book aims to address these tensions by providing a critical overview of debates over organised abuse before going on to examine the lives of 21 adults who described organised abuse in childhood. It draws on a range of perspectives from sociology, criminology and psychoanalysis in order to situate organised abuse within the study of gendered violence more broadly, and to explore the ways in which organised abuse intensifies but also transgresses against normative modes of masculine power. The book will consider a range of theorists who have argued that the social construction of gender is replete with fantasies of masculine control and transcendence that can be embodied through eroticised violence. In such acts, the perpetrator claims his position as masculine 'subject' by forcing the victim to occupy the position of the subordinate 'other' or 'object', whether the victim is a woman, child or another man. The book's title 'Organised sexual abuse' refers to the sexual abuse of adults as well as children since, for some victims, organised abuse does not end in childhood and may persist into adulthood. The secretive nature of these practices is maintained not only by the collusion of perpetrators but also by the socially legitimised power that perpetrators of organised abuse enjoy over their victims as parents, teachers and other authority figures. Whilst organised abuse refers to a relatively uncommon and extreme form of child abuse, it nonetheless raises larger questions about gender, age and power.

The majority of the available literature on organised abuse is concerned with the psychotherapeutic treatment of survivors but the focus of this book is not on the survivor as client but rather on the survivor as witness. The book draws on the life histories and experiences of survivors to develop a criminological model of organised abuse. This model may enrich the understanding of the clinician or therapist and thus provide useful background information for treatment, and it may also serve as a validating resource for survivors who feel ready to examine their background from a sociological or criminological perspective. However, it should be recognised that this book does not provide

guidelines for treatment or recovery from organised abuse. Furthermore, the material presented here is often disturbing and all readers should be mindful of the potential for vicarious traumatisation. Readers who have survived sexual abuse and organised abuse are respectfully requested to remain vigilant regarding their emotional wellbeing.

Some readers may find it a curious or even unscientific endeavour to craft a criminological model of organised abuse based on the testimony of survivors. One of the standard objections to qualitative research is that participants may lie or fantasise in interview. It has been suggested that adults who report severe child sexual abuse are particularly prone to such confabulation. Whilst all forms of research, whether qualitative or quantitative, may be impacted upon by memory error or false reporting, there is no evidence that qualitative research is particularly vulnerable to this, nor is there any evidence that a fantasy- or lie-prone individual would be particularly likely to volunteer for research into child sexual abuse. Research has consistently found that child abuse histories, including severe and sadistic abuse, are accurate and can be corroborated (Ross 2009, Otnow et al. 1997, Chu et al. 1999). Survivors of child abuse may struggle with amnesia and other forms of memory disturbance but the notion that they are particularly prone to suggestion and confabulation has yet to find a scientific basis. It is interesting to note that questions about the veracity of eyewitness evidence appear to be asked far more frequently in relation to sexual abuse and rape than in relation to other crimes. The research on which this book is based has been conducted with an ethical commitment to taking the lives and voices of survivors of organised abuse seriously.

The book begins with an examination of the challenges involved in developing a coherent explanatory framework for organised abuse. The chapter 'A subject of smoke and mirrors: Understanding organised abuse' takes its title from a description of ritualistic and sadistic abuse proffered by Professor Roland Summit (Summit 1994: 5), a pioneer in this field. 'Smoke and mirrors' is a useful metaphor for the ways in which organised abuse has eluded conceptualisation and understanding. The chapter provides an overview of the often incendiary debates over organised abuse before going on to suggest that critical theories of gender, crime and intersubjectivity may offer new insights into the phenomenon.

The second chapter draws together the available literature on organised abuse and develops a simple typology of cases based on the context in which they arise: network (or extra-familial), familial and institutional. Ritual abuse is discussed as an abusive behaviour that demarcates a particularly challenging form of organised abuse. By synthesising clinical and case review data with case studies and survivor accounts this chapter suggests that organised abuse can sensibly be understood in terms of the intersections of gender, age and power in a range of contexts.

The themes of gender, age and power is examined further in Chapter 3 from an historical perspective. This chapter argues that the construction of

masculine sexuality by the 18th-century libertines as a 'natural' and predatory instinct has important parallels in modern society, including organised abuse. The work of the Marquis de Sade is used to illustrate the ways in which organised, sadistic and even ritualistic abuse can be understood as symbolic enactments of a pervasive ideology of masculine sexual aggression.

Chapter 4, 'Organised abuse and the pleasures of disbelief', uses Žižek's (1991) insights into the political role of enjoyment to analyse the hyperbole and scorn that has characterised the sceptical account of organised and ritualistic abuse. The central argument of this chapter is that organised abuse has come to public attention primarily as a subject of ridicule within the highly partisan writings of journalists, academics and activists aligned with advocacy groups for people accused of sexual abuse. Whilst highlighting the pervasive misrepresentations that characterise these accounts, the chapter also implicates media consumers in the production of ignorance and disdain in relation to organised abuse and women's and children's accounts of sexual abuse more generally.

The fifth chapter is autobiographical and describes the circumstances that led to the research upon which this book is based. It is called 'Down the rabbit hole: my story' because it describes my inadvertent 'tumble' into the world of organised abuse through my friendship with a young woman, 'Sarah'. This chapter provides an account of this friendship and how it endured through a period of intense stress, as the men who had subjected Sarah to organised abuse in childhood attempted to draw her back into the cycle of abuse and violence as an adult. This account is provided with the intention of highlighting the diversity of experiences with organised abuse and the ways in which men's experiences as witnesses to gendered violence can serve as the basis for resistance to it.

The following five chapters report on the results of life history research with adults with histories of organised abuse. Chapter 6 provides an overview of the common themes that characterised survivors' experiences of abuse, neglect and invalidation in childhood, and in particular how their accounts of life at home and school foreground the powerlessness of children. The seventh chapter is based on the accounts of participants whose organised abuse was arranged by their parents and other family members. It describes the 'two worlds' of severe sexual abuse at home and the charade of normalcy at school and in the community.

Chapter 8 focuses on the ways in which sexually abusive groups are characterised by processes of control, exchange and sadism. These themes are illustrated by the accounts of participants who were subject to network or institutional abuse; that is, organised abuse outside the family. The chapter combines sociological and psychoanalytic theory to describe the ways in which children are objectified, and their inner life denied, as they become entrapped within the dynamics of power and control that structure sexually abusive groups. This process is explored in more detail in Chapter 9, 'Ritual and torture in organised abuse', which argues that ritualistic abuse and torture are

practices through which perpetrators of organised abuse attempt to intensify relations of domination and subordination.

The final chapter examines the controversial reports of murder and atrocity that have surfaced in accounts of organised abuse. Rather than dismiss them out of hand, this chapter suggests that these accounts can be considered credible in light of the sadistic, narcissistic fantasies that are manifest within sexually abusive groups. The book concludes by considering the challenges that organised abuse continues to pose to contemporary policy and practice in relation to sexual abuse and understandings of gendered violence.

Terminology

At present, there is no commonly accepted definition or description of complex cases of sexual abuse involving multiple abusers and multiple children. Generic terms such as 'sex ring', 'paedophile ring' or 'sexual exploitation' are unclear, since they tend to imply the abuse of children by predatory strangers when the relations between victims and abusers are often more complex than this. Cases are often categorised according to the forms of sexual abuse engaged in by perpetrators (eg a 'ritual abuse' case or a 'child pornography' case) but abusive groups tend to engage in multiple forms of abuse (eg both ritual abuse *and* the manufacture of child abuse images). Hence these distinctions are somewhat artificial and are often drawn according to the interests and priorities of the investigator/researcher rather than on the characteristics of the case. The simultaneous abuse of children and women, and the abuse of children into adulthood, adds an additional layer of complexity to the study of multi-perpetrator sexual offences by challenging taken-for-granted distinctions between rape and child sexual abuse.

This book employs the terms 'organised sexual abuse' and 'organised abuse' as relatively simple and inclusive descriptors for any occurrence of sexual abuse in which multiple victims have been exploited by multiple perpetrators acting in concert, in which some of the victims are children. This definition of organised abuse is drawn from La Fontaine (1993) and is consonant with the use of the term by other researchers (Bibby 1996a, Gallagher et al. 1996), however it acknowledges the co-abuse of children and women by some abusive groups. In this book, where a case of sexual abuse involves multiple victims (children or children and adults), multiple perpetrators, multiple incidents of abuse and evidence of premeditation and coordination between perpetrators, then it is categorised as a case of 'organised abuse'. The exclusion of any case of sexual abuse or exploitation from this definition of organised abuse is not a statement about the seriousness of the harm inflicted on the victim/s' or the gravity of the crimes committed by the abusers. This project is not based on a hierarchy of victimisation with 'organised abuse' at the top, but rather on a 'connective model' (Kelly 1998) that explores the commonalities that emerge from diverse experiences of organised abuse.

The book refers regularly to 'victims', 'survivors' and 'perpetrators'. These are contested terms in the literature and are often associated with simple dichotomies and absolutes, eg good victim/bad perpetrator, broken victim/recovered survivor. As the book will discuss, the lines of demarcation here are not fixed, since a 'survivor' may still be periodically 'victimised' by abusive groups despite their efforts to prevent such victimisation, 'victimisation' may include forced perpetration, and a 'perpetrator' may have an extensive history of 'victimisation'. Whilst acknowledging their ambiguities, the terms are used in this book as a kind of shorthand to situate social actors in terms of prior or ongoing victimisation and/or perpetration in organised abuse. 'Victim' refers to children or adults currently being victimised (which may include forced perpetration, which is understood as an important dimension of victimisation) and 'survivor' refers to children or adults who are no longer being victimised, or who are taking decisive steps to bring ongoing victimisation to an end. In general, the term 'perpetrator' is used to refer specifically to adults who are active in the planning and commission of sexual abuse and organised abuse. It should be acknowledged that, from the perspective of a survivor, an adult may be meaningfully and accurately described as a 'perpetrator' although an observer might be more circumspect in light of the 'perpetrator's' life history and circumstances. It is a testament to the empathy and compassion displayed by the survivors interviewed for this book that they often reflected on these ambiguities themselves, even when describing people in their past who had subjected them to extensive harm and violence.

Chapter 1

A subject of smoke and mirrors

Understanding organised abuse

The figure of the child at risk is a potent one in Western culture, and the sexual abuse and exploitation of children has long been a focal point of social anxiety. Child sexual exploitation is often invoked in public discourse to advance a range of agendas, only some of which are related to the wellbeing and security of victimised and vulnerable children. Reports of child prostitution and exploitation in the 'third world' have become an important part of the rationalisation of Western border control and national security policies (O'Connell Davidson 2005). In the United States, accusations of mass child molestation have been a feature of homophobic slander since the Cold War, in which nationalist propaganda conflated socialism, child sex crimes and homosexuality as a combined threat to social order (eg Fejes 2000). In Australia, allegations of 'paedophile rings' have been used to justify a range of punitive interventions into Indigenous families and communities (Brown and Brown 2007). In Britain, reports of Muslim 'sex rings' that prey on white teenage girls have stirred up a predictable response from racist and right-wing groups (Taylor 2012). What emerges clearly from these heated discussions is the way in which organised abuse can be invoked for maximum political gain and impact.

The rhetorical power of organised abuse comes from its unthinkable heinousness. When it is referred to in Western media and commentary, it is pervasively attributed to the 'Other' in the psychoanalytic sense: that which is considered radically different and outside the 'self'. Hence organised abuse is frequently associated by Westerners with ethnic communities and developing countries, with the implication that they are more dangerous and less civilised, or it is alleged to be committed by groups considered perverted and pathological, whether paedophiles, homosexuals or some conflation of the two. The invocation of organised abuse is a blunt but often effective way of polarising debate in order to raise suspicions about a particular social group or else to recast complex debates in black-and-white terms. State authorities and social movements have played a sometimes conflicting but combined role in shaping this debate. Sociologists and historians have made useful contributions by pointing to the political and cultural dynamics that shape overblown

discourses about child endangerment and protection (Kincaid 1998, Jenkins 1998). However, they have sometimes reduced the subject of organised abuse to the moral panics that surround it, without considering the possibility that representations of organised abuse, however sensationalised, may have their origins in lived experience.

There are a range of useful and illuminating analyses of the media construction of organised abuse as it became front-page news in the 1980s and 1990s (Kitzinger 2004, Atmore 1997, Kelly 1998), but this book is focused on organised abuse as a criminal practice *as well as* a discursive object of study, debate and disagreement. These two dimensions of the topic are inextricably linked because precisely *where* and *how* organised abuse is reported to take place is an important determinant of how it is understood. Prior to the 1980s, the predominant view of the police, psychiatrists and other authoritative professionals was that organised abuse occurred primarily outside the family where it was committed by extra-familial 'paedophiles'. This conceptualisation of organised abuse has received enduring community support to the present day, where concerns over children's safety is often framed in terms of their vulnerability to manipulation by 'paedophiles' and 'sex rings'. This view dovetails more generally with the medico-legal and media construction of the 'paedophile' as an external threat to the sanctity of the family and community (Cowburn and Dominelli 2001) but it is confounded by evidence that organised abuse and other forms of serious sexual abuse often originates in the home or in institutions, such as schools and churches, where adults have socially legitimate authority over children.

As mandatory reporting laws and community awareness drove an increase in child protection investigations throughout the 1980s, some children began to disclose premeditated, sadistic and organised abuse by their parents, relatives and other caregivers such as priests and teachers (Hechler 1988). Adults in psychotherapy described similar experiences. The dichotomies that had previously associated organised abuse with the dangerous, external 'Other' had been breached, and the incendiary debate that followed is an illustration of the depth of the collective desire to see them restored. Campbell (1988) noted the paradox that, whilst journalists and politicians often demand that the authorities respond more decisively in response to a 'crisis' of sexual abuse, the action that is taken is then subsequently construed as a 'crisis'. This has been a particularly pronounced tendency of the public reception to allegations of organised abuse. The removal of children from their parents due to disclosures of organised abuse, the provision of mental health care to survivors of organised abuse, police investigations of allegations of organised abuse and the prosecution of alleged perpetrators of organised abuse have all generated their own controversies.

These were disagreements that were cloaked in the vocabulary of science and objectivity but nonetheless were played out in sensationalised fashion on primetime television, glossy news magazines and populist books, drawing