

The **politics** and **experience**
of **ritual abuse**

Beyond disbelief

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Introduction

The terms 'ritual abuse' and 'satanic ritual abuse' were coined in the early 1980s and appeared in print first in North America and then in the Netherlands, Britain, Germany, Sweden and Australia from 1984 onwards. Although the prosecution of day-care workers in the Californian McMartin preschool case was reported internationally, the appearance of the terms in Britain has mostly related to a series of controversial and high-profile child protection cases in Congleton (1988), Nottingham (1989), Rochdale (1990), Manchester (1990), Orkney (1991) and Essex (1991).

The reality of ritual abuse has been highly contested. Any exploration of the experiences of those who claim to have suffered such abuse will inevitably be surrounded by a cacaphony of questions about the veracity of accounts and the motivations of claim-makers. My intention in writing this book has been to 'look both ways': to take seriously the accounts of survivors while simultaneously exploring the politics of the field in which their accounts have emerged. I do not set out to convince readers – on the basis of the evidence I have collected, the impassioned eloquence of the testimony of my interviewees, or the arguments I construct around them – that ritual abuse 'really happens'. My project is both less ambitious and more fundamental; for I am concerned with how validity is accorded to some kinds of life-stories and not others and how some people are constituted as reliable witnesses of their own lives while others are discredited.

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In Britain, the trajectory of the term 'ritual abuse' has been from unseen to disappeared over the course of ten years. This is illustrated by the appearance and disappearance of any discussion of such abuse in subsequent editions of *Working Together under the Children Act 1989* – the key government document on child protection (Department of Health 1991). In 1991, the newly recognized possibility of ritual abuse was officially acknowledged as a type or subset of organized abuse:

5.26.1 Organized abuse is a generic term which covers abuse which may involve a number of abusers, a number of abused children and young people and often encompasses different forms of abuse . . .

5.26.2 A wide range of abusing activity is covered by this term, from small paedophile or pornographic rings, often but not always organized for profit, with most participants knowing one other, to large networks of individual groups or families which may be spread more widely and in which not all participants will be known to each other. Some organized groups may use bizarre or ritualized behaviour, sometimes associated with particular 'belief' systems. This can be a powerful mechanism to frighten the abused children into not telling of their experiences.

(Department of Health 1991: 38)

In the 1998 *Working Together* consultation document, the equivalent section reads as follows:

6.23 Organized or multiple abuse may be defined as abuse involving more than one abuser and a number of related or non-related children and young people. The abusers concerned may be acting in concert to abuse children, or may be using an institutional framework or position of authority to recruit children for abuse.

6.24 Organized or multiple abuse occur both as part of a network of abuse across a family or community, and within institutions such as residential homes and schools. Such abuse is profoundly traumatic for the children who become involved.

(Department of Health 1998: 88)

Following the publication of research commissioned by the Department of Health (La Fontaine 1994), bizarre and ritualized abuse has disappeared to be replaced on the official agenda of concern by institutional abuse. Media attention to cases follows the same pattern, such that a case of multigenerational intra- and extra-familial abuse over a 30-year period and involving bizarre and ritualized features, which reached court in 1998, received almost no national coverage (Davies 1998). By contrast the network of abusers operating in Clwyd children's homes since the 1970s repeatedly achieved headline status throughout the late 1990s.

Although research undertaken by Jean La Fontaine for the Department of Health was officially concerned with the extent and nature of organized and ritual abuse, it is clear from the final report that its main purpose was to

clarify whether ritual abuse, in the terms then being reported by adolescents and adults, needed to be taken seriously by those concerned with the protection of children (La Fontaine 1994). In other words, the research task was to discover whether abuse of this kind really happened. Sadly the methods employed were not well designed to address that question rigorously (see Chapter 2 for further discussion of this research) and adult survivors' accounts were simply dismissed as follows:

It should be recognized . . . that adults who claim to have been ritually abused, usually known as 'survivors', have been very influential. While their stories 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. Most survivors are women, though there is a male survivors' group in London. Some of them are now offering therapy, training or support to workers, often without any further training.¹

(La Fontaine 1994: 4)

Terminology

In this book I use the term 'ritual abuse' to refer to one dimension of the childhood abuse described by my informants. A widely used definition of what the term 'ritual abuse' refers to has been that provided by David Finkelhor:

Abuse that occurs in a context linked to some symbols or group activity that have a religious, magical or supernatural connotation, and where the invocation of these symbols or activities, repeated over time, is used to frighten and intimidate the children.

(Finkelhor *et al.* 1988: 59)

Such a definition does not assume that ritual abuse is necessarily coupled to a particular belief system as do the terms 'satanic ritual abuse' or 'satanist abuse'. There are a number of reasons why this might matter. First, it avoids prejudging the issue of what, if anything, those perpetrating ritualized abuses may believe. Second, it remains agnostic about what kinds of symbols or beliefs might support such abuses. I suspect that abuses similar to those described in this book have at one time or another been perpetrated in the name of every world religion. Even minority faiths frequently spawn secretive and corrupt cults which provide for perverse and illegitimate access to pleasure and power. In the course of undertaking the research for this book, I have had contact with individuals who have experienced ritualized abuse in diverse religious contexts: an evangelical church, a 'breakaway' Mormon sect, a Pagan coven, a Roman Catholic convent school and within 'traditional' cults in Southern and West Africa. Their stories are not, however, central to this book, for I have elected to focus on those accounts which have been at the heart of the controversy over the reality of ritual abuse, and

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in which the symbols and practices used include those popularly associated with the inversion of Christian beliefs and the worship of Satan. It may seem perverse on my part to reject the term 'satanic ritual abuse' while focusing on the kinds of accounts which have usually been so labelled. This is not, however, merely a politic side-step to avoid a highly charged – and much disparaged – term. My argument is that while those fitting the general 'satanic ritual abuse' profile were by far the majority of my informants (see Appendix), a more thorough examination of the beliefs, symbols and practices they described suggested an eclectic pan-theistic occultism rather than some kind of orthodox satanism (see Chapter 4).

In using the term 'ritual abuse', I am indicating that what is explored between these covers may well turn out to be merely one corner of an ugly global tapestry of organized child abuse which draws strength, security and longevity from the various religious forms with which it is entwined. The acceptance of stories of one sort allows related stories to be told; nowhere has this been more true than in relation to child abuse. The terms we use to discuss the identified problems of the moment help determine whether a field remains open to or closed off from the possibility of different accounts of experience emerging and reshaping knowledge.

A **sociological approach**

The role of sociologists in taking seriously the perspectives of those outwith the places and professions that produce the dominant accounts of how the world is and should be, is a long and honourable one. However, as Howard Becker pointed out in *Sociological Work*:

We provoke the suspicion that we are biased in favour of . . . subordinate parties when[ever] we tell the story from their point of view . . . when[ever] we assume, for the purposes of our research, that subordinates have as much right to be heard as superordinates, that they are as likely to be telling the truth as they see it as superordinates . . .

[In other words] we provoke the charge of bias, in ourselves and others, by refusing to give credence and deference to an established status order, in which knowledge of truth and the right to be heard are not equally distributed.

(Becker 1970: 126–7)

In any particular instance, things are often more complicated and contested than such a picture – of a binary distinction between those with and those without the power to define the truth – suggests. Controversies over child abuse generally involve multiple hierarchies within and between professions competing for definitional authority; these in turn are crosscut with gendered patterns of power and status. Police officers oppose social work 'sentiment' with a focus on forensic facts; consultant psychiatrists warn nurses against being drawn into patient fantasies. At the same time feminists, children's

rights advocates, the 'falsely accused', service users and parents' groups organize to influence the agenda if not overthrow the entire system. However, there are still those who rarely get heard amid the clamour, those who are much discussed but rarely speak, those child victims and adult survivors who are located as the point of origin of all child abuse discourse but whose contribution to identifying the problem and its solutions has been quickly overtaken by a new category of experts speaking on their behalf. Experts who are in turn interrogated by other experts challenging the truth status of their testimonies.

Despite the considerable rhetoric about listening to and believing children who claim to have been abused, professional practices suggest something quite different. Child sexual abuse professionals list indicators and risk factors, interpret behavioural signs and 'read' the evidence of children's bodies which other professionals then contest. Parallel practices have converted adult survivors into patients and plaintiffs. If we trace the emergence of 'sexual abuse' as an acknowledged social problem, we can see the ebbs and flows of power as different versions of the causes, prevalence and corrective treatment come to prominence and are superseded. In Ken Plummer's words: 'The power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story, under the conditions of one's own choosing, is part of the political process' (Plummer 1995: 26).

Feminist sociologists, oral historians and activists have often described their task as that of 'giving a voice' to particular groups of women rendered mute in patriarchal discourse. The metaphor of 'breaking the silence' has been frequently employed to describe the emergence of new stories from previously muted perspectives. Such approaches have sometimes oversimplified what occurs, assuming that some unitary truth about 'women's experience' could be uncovered by asking women about their lives. More frequently, however, feminist scholarship has been at the forefront of exploring the complex ways in which accounts are produced, the interpenetrations of public and private stories (Jamieson 1998) and the importance of the context of emergence to the story that gets told.

Dorothy Smith's classic study 'K is mentally ill' (Smith 1990b) of the way in which a particular account of reality makes itself convincing and the alternative interpretations of the same 'facts', which could support quite different conclusions, has provided an inspiration and model for the work undertaken here. One part of my multi-stranded task is to deconstruct the (currently) dominant account of ritual abuse which claims that: 'when you whittle away patients with therapist encouraged multiple personality disorder, patients with therapist encouraged false memories, the deluded, and those perpetrating a hoax, nothing remains' (Professor Richard Green, letter to the editor, *Independent*, 12 February 2000). I am concerned to explore the ways in which this version of reality has come to dominance in the public sphere, the wider arguments upon which it draws and the constructions of evidence it employs. In addition, I suggest that alternative readings of survivors' accounts are possible and develop such a reading. Becker has suggested that it is useful 'to think of every way of representing social reality as perfect – for something' (Becker 1986a: 125). The politically important questions are 'what and who are various representations good for?'

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My alternative reading of accounts of ritual abuse depends upon paying detailed attention to what those claiming lived experiences of such abuses actually have to say – hence it is based heavily upon the life-history interviews I conducted with thirteen adult survivors. The carefulness and respect with which I have sought to treat interviewees' words, endeavouring to find a balance between protecting their confidentiality and enabling them to speak openly about their lives, can be summed up as 'taking my interviewees seriously'. The most important aspect of this approach is taking account of people's own accounts of themselves, regarding them as 'persons of serious intent' endeavouring to make sense of their lives:

This does not mean taking these accounts at face value or as being the last word but at least it means being prepared to use a person's own evaluations as a kind of test against the valuations of others.

(Morgan 1990: 174)

One of the most important ways in which this approach contrasts with the treatment of survivors' life-stories within the discourse of disbelief is in terms of the kind of textual surgery performed upon them. None of the sceptical accounts that I consider in Chapter 2 is based on any direct engagement with first-person testimony. Where survivors' life-stories are referred to, it is as collections of bizarre claims concerning 'human sacrifice', 'cannibalism' and 'satanism'. This decontextualization is a powerful factor in prompting disbelief (see Chapter 2). While the material collected for this book includes the same kinds of 'gruesome stories', my discussion is framed quite differently. Sceptical accounts disembody such stories from the context of whole lives; by contrast I analyse them in relation to the more mundane details that surround them, maintaining rather than severing their links to other parts of the narrative. My aim has been to apply the same kind of sociological approach to the life-histories of survivors of ritual abuse as that developed over many years in the work of Ken Plummer (see Plummer 1995). To view them as situated tellings, constructed for a particular audience and particular purposes, but none the less as a crucial route to understanding human experience.

Ultimately we have no special sociological truth test, but must subject all accounts to what Herbert Blumer called the 'everyday tests of practical reason: plausibility, illumination and reasonableness':

This is a matter of judgement, but it isn't wholly an arbitrary matter, because I distinctly feel that one who has an intimate familiarity with the people and the type of experience with which he [*sic*] is dealing will make propositions which will seem more reasonable than would be true of propositions proposed by someone who lacks such knowledge.

(Blumer 1939: 99)

Or, as Norman Denzin suggested, what counts as evidence, validity and representativeness in assessing life narratives has to be conceived in terms of the adequacy and authenticity of descriptions:

A thick description goes beyond fact to detail, context, emotion, and webs of relationship. In a thick description the voices, feelings, and meanings of persons are heard . . . Verisimilitude derives from authentic, thick descriptions. It is achieved when the author of a document brings the life world alive in the mind of the reader.

(Denzin 1989: 25)

In addition, 'truth status' is tied up with ideas of rigour and clarity and a willingness to be hospitable to facts that could be more comfortably ignored. As Mary Maynard has argued:

At the very least this call for rigour involves being clear about one's theoretical assumptions, the nature of the research process, the criteria against which 'good' knowledge can be judged and the strategies used for interpretation and analysis. In feminist work the suggestion is that all of these things are made available for scrutiny, comment and (re)negotiation, as part of the process through which standards are evaluated and judged.

(Maynard 1994: 24-5)

The difficulty remains, however, that the nature of evidence and the appropriate procedures for verification appear to be very different in different contexts. As the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner described it:

A good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds. Both can be used as means for convincing another. Yet what they convince of is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness. The one verifies by eventual appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical proof. The other establishes not truth but verisimilitude.

(Bruner 1986: 11)

One way of describing this book is as stories speaking to arguments – the two will never entirely join up, but we have no choice but to continue to use both. If the stories of ritual abuse survivors are given the opportunity to be considered in terms of their verisimilitude, this may serve to keep the door open to seeking – in particular cases – the corroborative testimony and forensic evidence that will satisfy the 'truth-tests' of courts of law.

I was aware from the outset that researching ritual abuse involved dealing with very specific issues of truth and reality. My interviewees described episodes of mind-bending sensory deprivation, the perceptual distortions caused by alcohol, drugs, dehydration and starvation, and a barrage of tricks, deceptions and deliberate obfuscation as part of their abuse. Some were eager to discuss these complexities, and all were unwilling to give definitive accounts of experiences the reality of which was uncertain. The potent mixture of drugs, dissociation, violence and group 'hysteria' made rituals particularly difficult to recall or describe clearly, and some interviewees made clear that they felt greater confidence in discussing more everyday abuses (see Chapter 3).

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These specific distortions of various kinds did not, however, disrupt the story overall; rather they were discussed as being a constitutive part of the experience of ritual abuse, or as one survivor put it:

They *aimed* to do your head in, you know. If I had said anything when I was little it would probably have seemed so unbelievable . . . so mixed up. Who'd have listened to the ramblings of a kid who probably never seemed to be 'all there' anyway?

(Sophie)

More generally, the construction of their life-stories as a project deliberately and painfully undertaken was part of the active understanding of interviewees. Having 'worked at' making sense of the past and how it had moulded and scarred them, there was a consciousness concerning the ways in which insight and understanding had changed their stories over time. They were aware of the controversial status of 'recovered memories' of abuse and described their own various experiences of 'forgetting', 'repressing' and remembering in relation to this. The five women who were in their late teens or twenties at the time of interview had left their abusive families and dealt with the effects of an abusive childhood at more or less the same time; for them escaping and remembering were intimately entangled. At the opposite end of the spectrum of memory suppression, Elizabeth had hardly any childhood memories until after her parents' deaths when she was in her fifties, and Erik was in his forties when he first remembered having been abused by his uncles and grandfather.

Eight interviewees had seen a range of professionals for counselling (these included psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychotherapists and social workers); two more had been supported by foster carers experienced in supporting sexually abused young people. Although everyone I interviewed had previously shared some of their memories with professionals, partners or friends, they were each telling their life-story as a whole for the first time in their interview for this research. Among those interviewees who had no experience of therapeutic support, one woman was particularly articulate about the issues involved in the reflexive project of remembering and narrating her life:

When I started properly having 'flashbacks' I didn't dare tell anyone – this was the 70s remember – I was afraid they'd lock me up and take my kids away. I'd got this idea from somewhere that you had to remember *everything*, every detail and go through it all. At the same time you don't want to think about any of it, so it takes forever . . . and I think now that I retraumatized myself picking over my memories for years. I wouldn't do it now!

And do you think they were all true – the memories you recovered?

Basically I do – but I didn't need that kind of detail to be OK . . . But some of the things were so repetitive you know . . . and a lot of the times at ceremonies you were so out of it – as a kid you just wanted to be anywhere but where you were, and I know I cut just cut off a lot of

the time – so I can't be sure bits from different times didn't get stuck together. It's like you remember one time and it stands in for all the other times doesn't it?

(Lynn)

Of course, Lynn is describing the *normal* process of remembering. 'Flash-backs' may be both vivid and intrusive but they are not CCTV recordings. The images fleetingly seen upon our inward eye must be pursued, recalled and worked up into the narratives we call memories.

My story

I first remember reading the term 'ritual abuse' in newspaper reports of the Nottingham (Broxtowe) case in 1989. Allegations of children being taken to 'witch parties' and being given 'funny drinks' seemed faintly ridiculous. I was annoyed and somewhat dismissive of a case which promised both to distract attention from the ordinary fathers and stepfathers who perpetrated the vast majority of sexual abuse and to make the serious issue of child rape into a pantomime. I had been a counsellor, trainer and activist concerned with issues of sexual violence for some years. I 'knew' what sexual abuse was, who did it and why; I 'knew' it had precious little to do with 'devil worship'. Social workers were still reeling from the 'backlash' of the Cleveland case and I was extremely wary of a case that sounded like a version of Cleveland with horns on.

I still have those 'black magic' moments when I cringe at the Wheatley-esque elements of ritual abuse and have to remind myself that abuse is no less awful because it has such tacky trappings. Indeed, the idea of surrounding child rape with tawdry occultism may be an additional indignity with which survivors must contend. However, my own relationship to the subject changed irrevocably through becoming personally involved in the case of a 14-year-old girl escaping ritual abuse.

It is rare that the biography of the sociologist is entirely independent of, or irrelevant to, the subject of study. I undertook this research for a number of reasons, not least in order to make sense of my own experience. The epistemological status accorded to proximity of relationship is by no means clear cut. There are situations in which intimate knowledge is privileged above expert knowledge: seasoned general practitioners (GPs) alert junior colleagues that, when it comes to a sick child, mother often does know best. However, emotional entanglement is equally frequently considered to contaminate the perspicacity of professional objectivity. In relation to ritual abuse, my direct involvement with a particular young survivor was doubtless a necessary, but not sufficient, precursor of the perspective I develop in this book.

When I look back towards the early 1990s, it is almost impossible to grasp how much my life was disrupted by coming to know about ritual abuse, or to really remember the fear, anxiety and confusion that enveloped my world. As I write, the young woman who became my foster daughter is embarking on her own professional life, she has friends, interests and qualifications, she

is tough and brave and funny and passionate, and I am immensely proud of her. The nightmares and mood swings, terror and dissociation have faded into the past. Her life is now her own.

It is impossible to recapture the 'shock of the new' in listening to her accounts of hypnosis and torture, of killing hens and sheep and babies, of eating maggots and vomit and human flesh, and of child prostitution and pornography. Over the course of five years of caring for Sinead, 'the field' of ritual abuse became my primary location. Discussions of forced abortion and ritual sacrifice began to seem ordinary, while the life-world I had previously shared with friends and colleagues sometimes felt unreal and insignificant. Undertaking the research on which this book is based allowed me to partially reverse this process such that I again defamiliarized that which had become almost taken-for-granted.

The inclusion of my foster daughter as an interviewee was one dimension of this process. When I began the research, I considered that involving Sinead would be ethically 'wrong'. Given our relationship, it would be difficult for her to make a decision based entirely on her own wishes. Given how much I knew about her life, it would be hard for her to edit her story as she might for a stranger, and so decide what would enter the public sphere and what remain private. In addition, I was anxious that combining the personal with the academic would cast doubt upon the credibility of my work. However, as the fieldwork progressed it became apparent that there was no clean line between Sinead being involved in the research and being excluded from it. Her life-story was so much part of my knowledge of ritual abuse, that it was always with me as a point of comparison and contrast with each new account I collected. I was struggling with how I could acknowledge this knowledge without bringing in Sinead's story by the back door, when she asked me if I would interview her as part of the research. In many ways my PhD was a 'family project', Sinead and I had become students at the same time, and she was well aware that I might still be working in broadcasting if she had not arrived in my life. Her analysis of the problem was straightforward: 'If you don't interview me, I'll be in there anyway as a voice without a name. I'd rather be included as myself'.

Our two-day interview was a tremendous experience. On a personal level, it allowed Sinead to talk 'as an adult' of experiences she had last whispered of in terror in the aftermath of nightmares. It was an opportunity for both of us to discover how far we had travelled in the course of five years.

The **chapters**

The Politics and Experience of Ritual Abuse mobilizes the life-stories of survivors in response to the discourse of disbelief that has discounted them as 'false memories' produced by a 'moral panic'. However, it begins by exploring first the historical antecedents that have enabled such life-stories to be told, and second, the reaction that has endeavoured to silence them once again. Chapter 1 'Child sexual abuse: the shaping of a social problem' provides a brief history of the development of knowledge about child sexual

abuse in order to describe the nature of the 'field' into which the accounts of survivors of ritual abuse emerged.

The sexual abuse of children was considered both rare and relatively harmless for most of the twentieth century. Feminists challenged this with evidence that sexual abuse was widespread and categorized it as one outcome of power relations within the patriarchal family. The chapter describes the challenges that ritual abuse survivors' accounts posed to what by the mid-1980s had become a feminist-informed orthodoxy on child sexual abuse. These challenges included the fact that in survivors' accounts of ritual abuse, women were *routinely* described as sexual abusers, and the apparent intergenerational transmission of ritual abuse which suggested the necessity of understanding how abuse may sometimes provide an apprenticeship in perpetration.

If a feminist-influenced discourse on child sexual abuse is the context within which ritual abuse has found a voice, a powerful backlash has been endeavouring to silence it since the mid-1980s. Chapter 2 'Unreliable witnesses: memories and moral panic' explores the discourse of disbelief and its twin claims that ritual abuse accounts are a product of moral panic and/or of false memories. The task of this chapter is to deconstruct the discourse of disbelief, exploring in detail the textual strategies mobilized to 'make doubt stick' and thereby to fracture the certainty of claims that the life histories of ritual abuse survivors are either fantasy or fraud.

In Chapter 3 'The nature of the beast: pornography, prostitution and everyday life', I turn for the first time to the life-history interviews themselves. I put aside the 'ritual' in accounts from survivors of ritual abuse in order to explore the 'ordinary' domestic and organized forms of sexual abuse and exploitation that dominated my interviewees' childhoods. I focus in this chapter on the abuse that interviewees described as taking place within the extended family, abuse in the form of prostitution and involved in the production of pornography. In doing so, I consider how far their accounts support or contradict what little is known about these 'other' forms of abuse more generally. At the same time, I am concerned to show that there is no easy way of filleting the 'ritual abuse' out of these narratives in order to transform them into some more readily digestible form of organized abuse.

Each of the four chapters that follow focus in turn on the least believable and most frequently dismissed aspects of accounts of ritual abuse. In Chapter 4 'The flesh and the word: beliefs and believing in ritual abuse', I explore survivors' claims concerning the importance of an occult belief system to those involved in ritual abuse – as the issue of whether any abusers who use ritual *believe* in their performances or merely dress up to frighten the children has been one of the issues central to the discourse of disbelief. Overly simplistic understandings of 'belief' may have contributed to scepticism about the possibility of contemporary ritual abuse. I show that in the experience of ritual abuse, the 'occult trappings' cannot easily be stripped away to expose the 'raw' abuse beneath but must be understood as an integral part of the suffering of victims and the satisfactions of perpetrators.

The women I interviewed did not analyse their experiences in feminist terms; on the contrary they often emphasized the 'equality' of men and women among their abusers. None the less they gave strongly gender-differentiated

descriptions of abusers, and described the domestic and cult divisions of labour which I discuss in Chapter 5 'The gender of horror'. In this chapter I also discuss the three interviews I conducted with male survivors in the USA and how these both supported and contrasted with women's accounts. I argue that the gender differences and dynamics described in relation to ritual abuse are grotesquely plausible; women who sadistically sexually abuse their own children and grandchildren do not cease to be believable as women.

In Chapter 6 'Making death meaningful', I turn to the claims in ritual abuse survivors' accounts which have probably attracted the most disbelief as being incredible and implausible: the reports of witnessing and participating in murder. I show how these accounts make sense within the life-histories of interviewees, cast light on their survival, and on the gendered nature of ritual abuse.

The reality of Multiple Personality Disorder has been almost as contested as that of ritual abuse - with which it is associated. In the final chapter 'Composing the self', I turn to the subject of identity, and explore the ways in which the survivors I interviewed explained the development of both loving and recalcitrant selves in the context of overwhelming abuse. I examine how the phenomenological experience of parental inconsistency, torture and dissociation help make sense of how a divided or multiple construction of self might map on to a remembered childhood, as well as providing a metaphor for the simultaneous acceptance and denial of unbearably painful memories. I argue that an understanding of life-stories and the identities which emerge from them as 'purely' discursive productions fails to account for the ability of survivors to act back on the schema set up to help, explain or discredit them.

Note

- 1 As far as I can ascertain, no group specifically for survivors of ritual abuse, male or female, existed in London at this time. Only one adult survivor was publicly active in training or support in the UK in the early 1990s.