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Conspiracy theories and paranoia: notes from a mind-control conference

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Some therapists' lack of skepticism may make them prime targets for racist propaganda.

The debate over "recovered" and "false" memories continues to be one of the most contentious issues in the field of psychology today. The debate is extremely polarized with very little amicable communication among members of the opposing camps. While such a dispute may eventually be beneficial to science, in that both sides are clearly being spurred on to produce original research at a frenetic pace, at the moment the clearest manifestation of this dichotomy is miscommunication and friction between factions. Such miscommunication has been exacerbated by a tendency of some theorists on both sides to make sweeping generalizations and use vague terminology. An example of such miscommunication is the use of the term recovered memory therapy, used frequently in books such as *Making Monsters* by Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters (1994). The term as they used it is not without its critics (e.g., Dalenberg 1995) who complain that the term is over-generalized. Conversely, in a televised debate, Charles Whitfield, a trauma therapist, stated that there is no such thing as recovered memory therapy. The true state of affairs likely rests somewhere in between.

While some misunderstandings may be rooted in semantics, others are more difficult to trace and harder still to describe adequately. It is very difficult to get quantitative data in the area of the beliefs held by therapists regarding topics that may manifest in the form of false memories in their patients. And although some surveys have attempted to obtain quantitative measures of therapists' beliefs, practices, and experiences regarding traumatic memory recovery and therapy (e.g., Poole, et. al. 1995), such surveys fail to fully inform the reader of the quality of those beliefs. In an attempt to obtain a qualitative analysis of the beliefs of therapists with regard to recovered memories of traumatic events, I have frequently attended sexual- and ritual-abuse conferences. Some of these conferences have afforded me valuable insight into the dynamics of a scientifically informed trauma therapy. At other times I have gained valuable insight into the beliefs of some "fringe" therapists who believe in vast and nefarious conspiracies organized to harm children. My purpose here is not to argue whether such beliefs are accurate or not; rather, I simply wish to outline what some of those beliefs are. The following is not meant to be representative of all therapists in this field. I offer only a description of what some therapists believe. The reader will please keep in mind that any qualitative description, such as this one, may not be used to infer anything about the population as a whole, but it may be illuminating in that there is a certain subpopulation that clearly is represented.

This article describes my experiences at a conference held in Dallas, Texas, March 23-26, 1995, by a group calling itself the "Society for the Investigation, Treatment and Prevention of Ritual and Cult Abuse" (SITPRCA). SITPRCA may be reached at P.O. Box 835564, Richardson, Texas 75083-5564.

The 1995 SITPRCA conference was titled "Cult and Ritual Abuse, Mind Control, and Dissociation: A Multidisciplinary Dialogue." The word dialogue is misleading because there were no skeptics or critics among the speakers and, as will be demonstrated, any dissension from the audience was strongly discouraged - it was essentially a monologue. The 1995 conference offered continuing education credit available through the Texas State Board of Examiners of Licensed Professional Counselors.

The conference was attended by 150 to 200 people. A significant minority of the audience consisted of patients who claimed to have had recovered memories of ritual abuse (several of whom I spoke with) and who were allowed access to even the most advanced professional training sessions, sometimes at the recommendations of their therapists.

The SITPRCA organization was created by Dallas therapist James Randall "Randy" Noblitt, currently the president of the group, and Pamela Perskin, its executive director. Noblitt lectures widely on the existence of ritual cults and mind-control techniques, and has served as an expert witness in a number of child-abuse cases. In the 1992 Austin, Texas, day care case of Fran and Dan Keller, he helped obtain a conviction by informing the jury that cults across America regularly ritually abuse children through torture and sexual abuse and that the cults make child pornography with these victims. Noblitt stated that these children will often not be able to recall the events because they are so highly traumatized, and that the severity of the abuse causes the amnesia. This testimony, combined with Noblitt's statement that he was "convinced" that the child in this case had experienced extreme trauma, apparently helped convince the jury that the Kellers operated a ritual-abuse cult in their day care center. At the time of that trial, Noblitt testified that in addition to supervising his own clinical employees he had been sought to consult in 15 similar cases and that he provides supervision for therapists individually and in groups. Noblitt and Perskin (1995) recently released a book outlining their beliefs about ritual abuse. While some mainstream therapists may conclude that those associated with SITPRCA represent a fringe element, I would point out that such organizations are able to have a dramatic influence on society.

Opening Remarks

The conference opened with a panel consisting of Walter Bowart (author of *Operation Mind Control* Dell, 1978), Mark Phillips (who claimed to have inside information on government mind-control techniques), and Alan Schefflin. Schefflin is a lawyer who has for years documented the Central Intelligence Agency experiments with "brainwashing" in the 1950s and 1960s and who spoke on a panel at the 1993 American Psychological Association (APA) meeting with memory researcher Elizabeth Loftus and again at the 1995 annual meeting along with Richard Kluft and several others. Bowart opened the conference with a direct appeal to the therapists. Bowart claimed that "the False Memory Spindrome [sic] Foundation . . . is a Central Intelligence Agency action. It is an action aimed at the psychological and psychiatric mental health community to discredit you, to keep you in fear and terror." Bowart stated that everyone connected with the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) will be shown to be "spooks or dupes." According to Bowart, the CIA is currently conducting a campaign of mind control against the American public and wants to discredit victims of these experiments so that their stories will be seen as false memories. Phillips spoke for a while about how he would reveal the trade secrets of mind control.

Schefflin gave a lengthy talk about how therapists can protect themselves against the lawsuits brought by former patients who retract memories of childhood abuse. These lectures were warmly received, especially Schefflin's. Perhaps because several speakers at the conference had been successfully sued by former clients, the therapists in attendance seemed quite fearful that their clients would retract their memories of abuse and sue them for instilling false memories. I felt that the opening remarks were overtly political for what was purported to be a scientific gathering.

Racist Conspiracy Theories and the Militias

Doc Marqui, a self-described former "school teacher and witch," lectured about the satanic "Illuminati" conspiracy, which he alleged President Bill Clinton was part of, serving as the "anti-Christ." Marqui assured the audience that this theory is not racist; but the fact is the Illuminati theory is the same one advocated by most members of the American militia movement, and it was utilized by the Nazis in their effort to justify their campaign of genocide against the Jews of Europe (Cohn 1966). The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is an anti-Semitic document (based on the Illuminati conspiracy theory) that purports to document plans for Jewish world domination and which first appeared in Russia in 1903 in a newspaper edited by a "noted and militant anti-Semite" (Cohn 1966, p. 65). The book was instituted as mandatory reading in German schools by the Nazis in 1933 (Cohn 1966). Marqui touted the overall validity of the *Protocols* while replacing the word Jews with the word satanists. The Illuminati conspiracy holds, in part, that large Jewish banking families have been orchestrating various political revolutions and machinations throughout Europe and America since the late

eighteenth century, with the ultimate aim of bringing about a satanic New World Order. Members of the militia movement have said they believe that the United Nations has been infiltrated by these "demonic forces" and is poised for a violent overthrow of the American government, after which American rights to own firearms will be removed and American citizens will be enslaved by the introduction of a cashless society, as foretold in the Bible's book of Revelation (see, e.g., Constantine 1995; Kelly 1995; Springmeier 1995; Stern 1996). Marqui stated that the Illuminati is essentially a shadow government that has controlled the United States since its inception, controls the Masonic order, and commits all manner of occult crime culminating in human sacrifices on eight days of each year. Much of this paranoia was chronicled more than 30 years ago by Richard Hofstadter (1965).

While the Illuminati conspiracy theory is widely endorsed by militia members, it is also embraced by reactionary groups such as: the Lyndon LaRouche organization (political analyst Chip Berlet [1994] stated that in the early 1970s, Lyndon LaRouche "took his followers . . . and guided them into fascist politics"); the John Birch Society (which Beret [1994] said believes "Insiders" have for years controlled the U.S. and former Soviet Union governments); and the Liberty Lobby. The Liberty Lobby, with its newspaper *Spotlight*, was created by Willis Carto, who also founded the Institute for Historical Review, which asserts that the Holocaust was a hoax (Berlet 1994).

Author Linda Blood, who spoke later in the day, protested that she was "unhappy to be following someone [Marqui] who is pushing the Protocols of the Elders of Zion," which she said was anti-Semitic trash. Blood's protest deeply angered some and bewildered others, while about four of Blood's friends clapped in support. Perskin, who moderated the session, announced that although she is Jewish she found nothing offensive in Marqui's lecture. Marqui appeared to me to be connecting existing racist conspiracy theories with the therapists' theories about satanic cults.

Marqui was followed by former Federal Bureau of Investigation agent Ted Gunderson, who highly praised Marqui's lecture. Gunderson is well known for his claims that an archaeological dig under the McMartin preschool showed evidence of tunnels, through which the children were allegedly spirited to other buildings to be prostituted in the community (Summit 1994). The results of this dig have for years gone unpublished while calls for funds to self-publish the results have been issued in newsletters such as the *Survivor Activist* (1994). Meanwhile, the integrity of the dig has been strongly disputed (Earl 1995). Gunderson presented what he called "new evidence" in the 1984 McMartin preschool sex-abuse case in Manhattan Beach, California. He produced a number of photographs of the foundation of a house in the hills above San Bernadino, California, that had burned down, he claimed, the night the charges were filed in the McMartin case. He alleged that the McMartin children were flown to this house and ritually abused, and that the house was torched to destroy evidence. The sum total of the evidence he presented to support this allegation was the existence of spray-painted satanic graffiti on the foundation stones and on boulders on the property. Apparently, several years had gone by between the time of the alleged fire and the time Gunderson snapped the photos. Yet Gunderson was dismissive of the idea that the house foundation on the lot, with its hillside vista of San Bernadino, had been used by teenagers who might have painted the graffiti after the fire. The therapists were enraptured and later asked if Gunderson was planning to publish his photos or if there was any chance of using this evidence in a new trial. The McMartin preschool case resulted in the longest criminal proceeding in American history and failed to produce any convictions (see e.g., Nathan and Suedecker 1995).

Gunderson then described a conversation he had with a witness, Paul Bonacci, from an alleged satanic-ritual abuse case in Nebraska that was detailed by former Nebraska state Sen. John DeCamp (1992), who was also a speaker at this conference. The grand jury of Lincoln described this case as an attack by DeCamp "for personal political gain and possible revenge" (Dorr 1991, p. 1), a "smear campaign," and a "carefully crafted hoax" (United Press International, September 18, 1990). The grand jury jailed one and indicted two others (including Bonacci) for perjury, and was so critical of DeCamp that he sued the grand jury for ridicule, though he quickly lost (Dorr 1991). A church in the area, the Nebraska Leadership Conference, responded by publishing a tract

(no date) named *The Mystery of the Carefully Crafted Hoax*, with a foreword by Gunderson, in which he continued the allegations of satanic-ritual crime. At the conference Gunderson related Bonacci's description of a slave auction in Las Vegas in which 25 to 30 vans pulled up, airplanes landed, and foreign men with turbans bought children and took them away. According to Gunderson: "Nobody knows what happened to those kids. They use them for several things: body parts, they use them for sacrificing, for sex slaves. But this is a big market. Does anybody have any idea what a blue-eyed, blond-haired eleven- or twelve-year girl would sell for? Fifty thousand dollars."

Gunderson claimed that there are currently 500 satanic cults in New York City alone, each averaging eight sacrificial murders a year, for a total of 4,000 human sacrifices every year. Gunderson did not explain how the cults remove bodies in the asphalt jungle of New York.

Gunderson believes in the threat posed by the New World Order, as do Marqui and militia members. Gunderson has appeared on Dateline NBC, at militia conferences (Witt 1995), on Michigan Militia member Mark Koernke's short-wave radio program, and on the cover of *Spotlight* (May 13, 1995), stating that the U.S. government intentionally bombed the Oklahoma City federal building in April 1995, in order to remove our rights through anti-terrorism bills. Gunderson informed the audience that *Spotlight* "tells it like it is," and urged audience members to call the subscription number, which he read aloud. On top of this, Gunderson gave an interview to Lyndon LaRouche's *Executive Intelligence Review* (May 25, 1990), in which he described FBI special agent Ken Lanning as "probably the most effective and foremost speaker for the satanic movement in this country, today or at any time in the past." Gunderson and Marqui seem to me to be attempting to introduce therapists to racist conspiracy theories and reactionary propaganda, while at the same time groups such as the LaRouche organization endorse satanic conspiracy theories to draw in new members.

Political analyst Chip Berlet's argument that radical right elements are seducing the left should be taken seriously. In his monograph *Right Woos Left* (Berlet 1994), he describes, among other examples, how the LaRouche organization has persistently destabilized legitimate leftist activist organizations by infiltrating these groups and then claiming that these groups endorse LaRouche. The LaRouchians also gain credibility through their association with legitimate political activists, which enables them to draw new converts. The cult-ritual abuse field is a prime example of such infiltration. Many therapists who specialize in treating ritual or other forms of abuse identify to some degree with feminism and other liberal ideals. When radical right conspiracists get such liberals to believe in the New World Order or "Operation Monarch" (a similar movement, described later) they gain a boost in credibility far beyond what they could expect by printing their stories in *Spotlight* or the *Executive Intelligence Review*.

Former Nebraska state Sen. John DeCamp, mentioned earlier, has been on the ritual-abuse circuit for some time now, talking about his 1992 book *The Franklin Cover-Up*, which purports to document a satanic organization in Nebraska that abused children and prostituted them within the White House. DeCamp gives a favorable mention to a fact-finding mission sponsored by LaRouche (DeCamp 1992, p. 241). The editors of the *Executive Intelligence Review* repeat DeCamp's claims and praise his book as "important" in their virulently anti-Semitic party tract titled *The Ugly Truth About the ADL* (Anti-Defamation League) (Editors of the *Executive Intelligence Review* 1992). The July 27, 1990, issue of the *Executive Intelligence Review* stated that the FBI in Nebraska covered up child abuse and murder.

On June 15, 1995, DeCamp appeared before a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing on domestic terrorism chaired by Arlen Specter. DeCamp appeared as a lawyer representing the American militia movement and the four militia leaders testifying that day. At a Washington, D.C., news conference, DeCamp glowingly described the militia movement as "a political movement in the birthing . . . painful, joyous, confusing, and exciting" (Janofsky 1995, p. 10). DeCamp also has clear ties with the Nebraska Leadership Conference. A call to the church office confirmed that the Nebraska Leadership Conference had "contributed significantly" to DeCamp's book.

DeCamp delighted the therapists at this conference during a luncheon session in which he described the allegations put forth in his book.

Conspiracy Theories in Action

I struck up a conversation with a woman and her son and learned that the woman claimed to have recovered memories of being abused in a satanic cult. She drove across two states to attend the conference, she said, in the hope that she could learn about Nazi scientists being brought to the United States after World War II. She knew nothing about this topic but seemed to suspect that it had something to do with her. The conversation drifted to the topic of treatment for sex offenders while they are incarcerated. At this point we were joined by a man, whom I'll call Felix, and his companion, who said that treatment for sex offenders is unnecessary because when the New World Order takes control of the country, members are going to shoot all prisoners and also eliminate three-quarters of the world's population. Felix described to us how the New World Order operated, manufacturing multiple personality disorder through torture and creating sex slaves and drug mules under the mind control of the CIA (this is the basis for the alleged "Operation Monarch"). Felix also described how the black helicopters of the New World Order landed in his hometown of Portland, Oregon, and black-suited storm troopers illegally searched all the homes in the neighborhood. There was a total news blackout of this because, Felix said, the media are part of the conspiracy. Later, Felix confided to me that his companion was wrong: the New World Order would not kill all the prisoners, but would use them as slave labor. Felix said he did not like to disagree with her because she was a former "Monarch" mind-control slave.

Felix sold me his newsletter, as big as a book, in which he makes some very strange claims: Charles Manson was programmed by the Illuminati, the Anti-Defamation League is controlled by Jewish satanists, and Marilyn Monroe was a mind-control slave. According to Felix, virtually anyone who disagrees with Felix is a Monarch slave, including prominent militia leader Bo Gritz, who talked Randy Weaver into surrendering at the 1992 incident at Ruby Ridge, Idaho. Most disturbingly, Felix told me that he works as a counselor and has helped "a lot" of people suffering from multiple personality disorder. Felix apparently has no mental-health counseling credentials, and his name badge identified him as "clergy." Nevertheless, he said he counsels dissociative clients and guides them through the intricacies of international cabals.

By this time a crowd had gathered around Felix and me. After Felix's monologue, a social worker from North Carolina informed the group that in the day care sex-abuse case she was investigating, she thought she remembered the kids talking about black helicopters. She said she would look into it.

Secrets of Mind Control Revealed

Felix's claims paled in comparison to what came next. Mark Phillips claimed to be a former government agent involved in mind-control experiments. He was always vague, never giving any information that could be checked. His companion, Cathy O'Brian, claimed to have survived years of torture and abuse at the hands of her CIA handlers in Operation Monarch (these two seem to be the source of most of the Monarch material). O'Brian maintained she had been tortured in unimaginable ways since the time she was a child, and that her cult handlers successfully created dissociative identity disorder in her, which was cured by Phillips, who also managed to hide her from the CIA. She was so savagely tortured, she said, that her back was a complete mass of scar tissue. Phillips added that he had once tried to count the scars but lost count somewhere in the hundreds. We never saw the scars, photos of the scars, or doctors' reports about the scars.

O'Brian stated that she was forced to have sex with a plethora of political figures including George Bush, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and Gerald Ford (whom she said she knew as "the neighborhood porn king"). She also said she was abused by Hillary Clinton (but not by Bill). Politicians were not the only ones involved - O'Brian stated that a number of baseball figures were in this satanic/CIA mind-control plot. She told me personally that virtually the entire country music industry is set up by the New World Order to make money. According to O'Brian, most popular country singers are Monarch slaves who had alter-personalities created

with good voices for singing. Phillips and O'Brian, along with Bowart and others, claimed that the CIA is currently abusing people through Operation Monarch. Phillips claimed 20 years of experience in genetics and said that the cults would breed slaves selectively to create musical geniuses. To test his vast experience with genetics, I asked him what he thought of the Human Genome Sequencing Project. He had never heard of it. It seems impossible for anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of genetics to be unaware of the biggest project ever in that field. Nevertheless, one author claims that Phillips is "currently deprogramming at least six Monarch slaves" (Springmeier 1995, p. 243).

It seems that a number of people in the audience were accepting of Phillips's and O'Brian's claims, although Perskin (of SITPRCA) informed me that this duo will not be asked back in the future because they failed to produce evidence of Operation Monarch. In a personal conversation with me (July 12, 1995), Schefflin stated that he had been able to obtain internal CIA documents corroborating the existence of mind-control experiments in the 1950s and 1960s. (The documents demonstrate that the CIA conducted unethical experiments to try to create multiple personalities in people for the purpose of creating a super spy who could keep vital information submerged in an alter personality [Thomas 1990].) But, he said, the paper trail completely died out by 1976. According to Schefflin, there are no credible reports of mind-control experiments after 1976 and no credible reports of any nature on Operation Monarch.

Catherine Gould gave an advanced workshop in which she described the mechanics of cult mind-control, extensively utilizing the mind-as-computer model. At one point she puzzled over the idea of cult members catching AIDS. She said that no one can figure out why the offenders are not "dropping like flies, because we know they don't practice safe cult sex." With all the blood, cannibalism, and unprotected sex, they ought to be catching a lot of sexually transmitted diseases. Therapist Jerry Mungadze offered a unique explanation. He suggested that mind-control programming boosts the immune system, making the victim resistant to the HIV virus, and that is why children in day care satanic-ritual abuse cases do not have elevated levels of sexually transmitted diseases.

Well, if they've found a cure for AIDS, why do they bother making money with pornography? Such a cure must be worth several billion dollars! In the grand tradition of conspiracy theories, discrepant information is explained away or, as in this case, incorporated into the scheme. Amazingly, this solution to the AIDS conundrum appeared to be taken seriously by most in the room.

Alternate Views Not Welcome

Chrystine Oksana lectured on her experiences of recovering memories of ritual abuse and her subsequent search for corroboration (see Oksana 1994). Oksana stated that she had read some 500 books on the topic of trauma and child abuse. For this reason I asked what she thought of the recent study by Linda Meyer Williams (1994). Oksana said she had not heard of it. The report by Williams is a pivotal study that demonstrated that a substantial minority of adults failed to disclose their documented emergency room visits when they were children, which ostensibly occurred because they had been sexually abused. The study demonstrated that some people may forget such events. There is a mistake in the text of the paper that states the existence of a nonsignificant trend such that, as the amount of force used in the commission of the abuse increases, recall decreases. The trend in the data actually shows that as the amount of force used in the commission of the abuse increases recall increases, which is opposite from, and fails to support, the theory of repression of traumatic memory (Harrington 1995). My description of this data set visibly angered several in the audience. One woman voiced disbelief of what I had said (preferring to believe that greater trauma typically was related to nonrecall), while a second woman shouted at me twice to read Lenore Terr's *Unchained Memories*. After a couple more rebuffs, the session ended in a stony silence. Yet another woman approached me and bluntly stated that she did not believe what I had said. I told her that I had a signed letter from Williams affirming my observations. This woman shrugged her shoulders and walked away smiling, as if to say that she still did not believe me. This appears to be an example of the resistant nature of strong beliefs toward discrepant information.

In the final analysis of the Williams data, the nonsignificant trend of force being associated with greater recall is probably a confound wherein both greater force and greater recall are associated with older age at time of abuse. Nevertheless, mine was a legitimate question to raise during a session on traumatic memory where it was stated that events that are more traumatic are more likely to be dissociated from consciousness. The scalding reaction I received from the audience supports the view that group social representations are not amenable to contradiction (Guerin, in press), and indicates that these are not issues open for discussion.

Skepticism and Satanism

The next session featured lawyer John Kiker and therapists Noblitt, Michael Moore, and Jan Maclean on the topic of the travails of being sued. Moore described in detail how violated he felt by being sued by former patients. Maclean stated you can always believe the stories children tell of being abused - children might make up other things, but they never make up traumatic events. I asked the panel what they thought of Steve Ceci's work. There was a moment of dead silence. None of the four panelists had ever heard of Ceci, who is one of the top developmental psychologists in the country and is well known for his recent experiments demonstrating the suggestibility of children. Ceci's "mousetrap" experiments (Ceci 1993; Ceci and Bruck 1995) demonstrated that repeated interviews regarding a false traumatic event (getting a finger caught in a mousetrap and being taken to the hospital) can result in a portion of children saying (and apparently believing) that the fictional traumatic event occurred. After I described this experiment, the panelists concluded (without reading Ceci's papers) that "these analogue studies" cannot be generalized to the real world.

It seems incredible that a psychological conference could be constructed with a seminar focusing on legal issues and the testimony of children in court, without a single person involved ever having heard of Ceci, who has contributed so much in this area. Indeed, this was the third day of the conference and there had been much talk of children's accusations of abuse, but not one mention of Ceci's research, which was why I felt obliged to pose the question. Often when I attend lectures I ask the speakers what they think of criticisms against them.

Immediately after the session a man connected with the conference demanded to know who I was, where I was from, and why I had asked the question. He was not satisfied with my answers and became visibly agitated when I tried to describe Ceci's experiments in greater detail. He soon gave up and informed me in a brusque tone that "everyone here thinks you are a plant." Perturbed, I entered the main hallway where I was confronted by Perskin, who asked if I had set out any literature in the bathroom. Apparently, someone had set out flyers from the Temple of Set, a satanic church, in the men's room!

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories have operated in many societies at many times and may be seen from a social-psychological perspective as serving certain functions within society. Conspiracy theories may of course represent real conspiracies, but they may also act in a manner similar to racist stereotyping in which the targeted group is seen as deviant and deeply immoral (Moscovici 1987). Conspiracy scholarship is on the one hand irrational, while on the other "far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities. It is, if not wholly rational, at least intensely rationalistic" (Hofstadter 1965, p. 36). Conspiracy theories offer individuals well-organized enemies against whom the self is defined; this offers them a guiding structure and purpose (Farr 1987).

I frequently observed a categorical rejection of the possibility that there could be "false" memories of traumatic events, and that anyone who made such claims must be "dirty" or a part of the "backlash," and that such claims could be dismissed without serious consideration. There was clearly an assumptive worldview or social representation that unified the audience and speakers, deviation from which would brand one as a spy. Actual debate was an anathema. The assumptions that united the group often veered toward conspiracism, though the particular elements of the conspiratorial plots could change from person to person (satanic cults, New World Order, etc.). Most, though by no means all, of the therapists appeared to be previously unaware of New World

Order conspiracy, though some appeared receptive to such ideas. Many seemed to be familiar with and believe in the Operation Monarch conspiracy, despite the lack of credible evidence for this. Of course, belief in conspiracies does not necessarily indicate therapeutic incompetence. However, I would be worried if those therapists interviewing children who are suspected of being victims of sexual abuse believed that the biblical revelation was coming in the form of satanic U.N. troops sweeping up children in black helicopters.

We cannot know what effect these therapists' conspiratorial beliefs may have on their clients. What we can see from these anecdotes is that strong beliefs are highly resistant to discrepant input and they do have a certain persuasive power. An indication of the influence of this conference can be seen in a quote from Jerry Leonard, a physicist who attended and wrote a review of the conference (Leonard 1995), in which he stated:

I came away with the opinion that cults are far more prevalent, well connected, sophisticated and dangerous than I had ever dreamed . . . apparently, this type of cult activity is fairly widespread. Police departments have stumbled on well organized nationwide child kidnapping rings. Ted Gunderson . . . described one case in which he personally uncovered an elementary school which had been built on a system of tunnels through which children were taken into neighboring houses . . . to participate in Satanic ritual abuse. . . . It is my personal view that the larger satanic cults are being manipulated by the federal intelligence and law enforcement agencies from behind the scenes.

Leonard informed me that this was his introduction to claims of cult child abuse. This testimonial demonstrates the persuasive power of the rumors that were put forth at this conference, at least to someone who was receptive to hearing them.

We have no way of knowing the percentage of practicing therapists who are represented by this style of thinking. Even if only a very small minority of the therapeutic community is represented, it is troubling to think of the effect these therapists may have on their colleagues, to say nothing of their clients. The theories presented at this conference may at times find wider appeal among more traditional therapists who are searching for evidence of cults, and it appears that such theories have enjoyed fairly wide popular circulation in the recent past (Victor 1993). Sherrill Mulhern (1991, 1994) has outlined the role played by conspiracy theories both historically, and at prestigious gatherings of psychologists. While the majority of psychological trauma specialists are not "conspiracists," they may at times be influenced by conspiracy claims, such as the claim that tunnels existed under the McMartin preschool, because such claims resemble or circumstantially support in some way the memories reported by clients.

The possibility of right-wing racist organizations using the present mental-health dilemma for their political gain is something therapists working in this area should be aware of. Therapists who only seek what is best for their clients may at times be vulnerable to propaganda put out by such groups. In the end it is the client, along with the client's family, who suffers. Whether motivated by such groups, claims that critics are active CIA agents who are engaged in a secret war against the American public, or that they are part of a nationwide backlash against belief in child abuse, only serve to make some therapists antagonistic to all forms of criticism, regardless of the motives of the critic. This is unfortunate because, as trauma therapist and researcher John Briere stated at the 1995 APA meeting, many of the criticisms have merit, and the field will be made better, not worse, because of them.

Note

I would like to thank Sherrill Mulhern for comments.

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