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Speak of the Devil: Rhetoric in Claims-Making About the Satanic Ritual Abuse Problem

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This paper uses Toulmin's (1958) scheme to conduct a rhetorical analysis of claims being made in the construction of the satanic ritual abuse of children problem. The analysis reveals that the persistence of these claims over the last fifteen years is the product not of their compelling facts or their effective conclusions, but of their persuasive warrants. These implicit, "self-evident truths" resonate well with recent cultural concerns about the vulnerability of children to abuse, and the satanic menace.

As an alternative to the traditional perspective that views all social problems as objective realities that generate collective behavior and political action, the constructionist perspective contends that all social problems actually are constituted by collective and political processes (Spector & Kitsuse, 1973). In making that assertion the constructionist perspective redirects the focus of analysis from what the purported social problem is, to the kinds of claims that are being made about it.

Claims are statements, descriptions, allegations and demands that are made by individuals and/or groups to convince others that a particular issue is indeed a social problem. They are made to "assert the existence of some condition, define it as offensive, harmful, and otherwise undesirable . . . publicize the assertions and stimulate controversy and . . . create a public or political issue over the matter" (Spector & Kitsuse, 1987, p. 147). Claims also suggest, even if they do not explicitly state, the particular ways by which a purported social problem can be resolved, redressed, or even eliminated (Schneider, 1985). The language of claims, therefore, must be deliberately, even powerfully, persuasive.

Rhetoric—the study of persuasion—can be used to analyze claims as Best (1987) demonstrated in an insightful examination of the claims that successfully transformed the issue of missing children into an exigent social problem over a decade ago. Similar types of rhetorical analyses have been conducted on the claims made about such social problems as elder abuse (Baumann, 1989), wife abuse (Loeske, 1987), child abuse (Pfohl, 1977), and child custody and support (Coltrane & Hickman, 1992).

This present article seeks to contribute to the sociology of rhetorical work by analyzing the claims being made about what is being defined as an urgent social problem—satanic ritual abuse of children. The article also forges a link between rhetoric and cultural context by locating these claims within a social and historical setting.

Satanic Ritual Abuse of Children

Claims that covert, diabolic satanic cults are abusing children in ritual ceremonies have been spreading across this country over the last fifteen years. Initially, the abuse was described as sexual in nature. The ceremonies during which the abuse is alleged to occur, however, also include such horrific practices as torture, forced drug ingestion, brainwashing, blood-drinking, cannibalism, and human sacrifices, thus the term “satanic ritual abuse” has come to embrace a melange of sexually, psychologically, and physically abusive acts.

These claims garnered the attention of the media almost immediately. While major newspapers consistently have reported them with some degree of skepticism, smaller local newspapers and the tabloid press have done so with credulity (Victor, 1993). And television has done so with enthusiasm. Satanic ritual abuse of children has become a staple topic of talk shows and even has found its way into primetime programming through made-for-television movies, news magazine reports, and documentaries.

Their newsworthiness and entertainment value aside, the claims about satanic ritual abuse of children are leading to, and simultaneously are the product of, highly publicized investigations, most of them targeting daycare and preschool providers. In fact, between 1983 and 1988 alone, investigations were initiated in

over a hundred communities across the country (Bromley, 1991). These resulted in scores of arrests, long and expensive criminal trials that all too often created irreparable rifts within the communities in question, many convictions, usually draconian prison sentences and, over the last five years or so, many reversals of those convictions upon appeal. In an effort to facilitate the prosecution of these cases, some states have passed bills that specifically criminalize ritualistic acts of any kind within the context of diabolic cults (Hicks, 1991).

The courtroom is not the only arena in which this purported social problem is being addressed. Professionals from a variety of disciplines are attending seminars on satanic ritual abuse of children that are being taught by other professionals as well as by laypersons who identify themselves as experts on the topic (Mulhern, 1991). The treatment of what is described as the devastating psychological effects of satanic ritual abuse for both child and adult survivors is emerging as a speciality for some psychotherapists (Ofshe & Watters, 1994). Dozens of hospital-based inpatient treatment programs are being developed across the country as well, along with a countless number of formal and informal survivor self-help groups, and even a nationally marketed 12-step recovery program (Ryder, 1992).

None of this activity is occurring in the absence of counterclaims. The natural history of the purported social problem of satanic ritual abuse of children is rife with adversarial assertions that all of this activity is evidence of nothing more than an attempt to construct a social problem out of imaginary deviance (Jenkins, 1992; Nathan, 1991; Ofshe & Watters, 1994; Victor, 1993). These counterclaims, however, have been offered essentially by those whose "field of argument," as Toulmin (1958, p. 100) would refer to it, is different than that of the primary claims-makers. Fields of argument not only are distinguished by discipline and profession, but by lines of reasoning; therefore claims that are persuasive within one field of argument are not necessarily so in another. Thus, there has been little dynamic tension between the claims and the counterclaims made about satanic ritual abuse of children as a social problem.

Dynamic tension very well may be predicted for the near future, however, as the findings of the long-awaited Goodman,

Qin, Bottoms, and Shaver (1995) study reach claims-makers. This empirical study investigates the characteristics and sources of over 12,000 allegations of satanic ritual abuse made over the last fifteen years in this country, and concludes that "there was no hard evidence for intergenerational satanic cults that sexually abuse children" (p. 48). This conclusion serves as the foundation upon which this present article builds its analysis.

Analytic Strategy

The analytic strategy of this article is to follow the lead of Best (1987) by using Toulmin's (1958) scheme to categorize claims in order to reveal their rhetorical structure, as well as to demonstrate the centrality of rhetoric to claims-making in general. In the case of the purported social problem of satanic ritual abuse of children, four major groups historically have acted as claims-makers: psychotherapists, survivor self-help groups, law enforcement professionals, and religious fundamentalists (deYoung, 1994; Jenkins & Maier-Katkin, 1992; Victor, 1994). The data base for this article, then, is comprised of the published and unpublished materials put out by these claims-makers, and includes scholarly journal articles, books, official reports, papers presented at conferences, and biographical and autobiographical accounts written about or by alleged survivors of satanic ritual abuse.

Rhetorical Analysis of Claims

Toulmin (1958) asserts that every argument has a basic structure. That structure consists of the conclusions, the facts or data that can be appealed to as the grounds of the conclusions, and the warrants that justify drawing the conclusions from the grounds.

Grounds

Facts and data comprise the grounds of any argument. Although they, themselves, are socially constructed (Best, 1989), they serve as the foundation upon which the argument is based, and can be appealed to whenever the argument's conclusions are called into question (Toulmin, 1958). There are three kinds of grounds statements being made by claims-makers in their active construction of satanic ritual abuse of children as a social problem: definitions, typifying examples, and numeric estimates.

Definitions. The most basic task of claims-making is to define the problem at hand. A definition serves the dual function of establishing a topic's domain and offering an orientation towards it (Best, 1987).

The immediate concern of claims-makers was to distinguish satanic ritual abuse of children from other, more prosaic, forms of child abuse to which the culture reluctantly had become sensitized during the 1970's and early 1980's (Olafson, Corwin, & Summit, 1993). In creating this new domain of threats to children, claims-makers tended to structure their definitions around the unique features of satanic ritual abuse: the horrific acts and their cultic context.

Kelley's (1989) definition is prototypic of those that focus on the acts. She defines satanic ritual abuse as "repetitive and systematic sexual, physical and psychological abuse of children by adults as part of cult or satanic worship" (p. 503). She further states that the abuse may involve such acts as "ingestion of human excrement, semen or blood; ceremonial killing of animals; threats of harm from supernatural powers; ingestion of drugs or magic potions; and use of satanic rituals, songs, chants, or symbols" (p. 503). Other definitions focus more on the cultic context of the acts. Young, Sachs, Braun, and Watkins (1991) define satanic ritual abuse of children as that which occurs within "intrafamilial, transgenerational groups that engage in explicit satanic worship which includes the following criminal practices: ritual torture, sacrificial murder, deviant sexual activity, and ceremonial cannibalism" (p. 182).

After fifteen years of active construction of this social problem, there still is no consensus definition of satanic ritual abuse of children (Lloyd, 1992). There is a shared sense of the sort of problem it is, however, that is revealed in the orientation statements made by claims-makers. In these statements, the problem of satanic ritual abuse of children is tantamount to evil, thus its threat is not just to children, but to society as a whole (Feldman, 1993; Friesen, 1992; Raschke, 1990; Sinason, 1994). This point is strongly made by Ryder (1992):

There is a concern not only about what these people [satanic cultists] are doing behind closed doors, in basements or attics, or out in the

woods at two o'clock in the morning, but about the evil stemming from these groups weaving itself into the fabric of society in broad daylight. (p. iv)

Typifying Examples. Orientation statements such as that are bolstered by what Johnson (1989) refers to as "horror stories." These typifying examples draw attention to the alleged problem, shape the perception of it and, in the case of satanic ritual abuse of children, are so emotionally evocative that they also detract attention from any skeptical counterclaims. A first-person account, published in a popular magazine by an adult who identifies herself as a survivor, is an example: "I was forced to watch as they killed my baby sister by decapitation in a ritual sacrifice. The sacrifice was followed by a communion ritual, during which human flesh and blood were consumed" (Rose, 1993, p. 42).

First-person accounts are not the only way in which typifying examples are presented. Most of the survivor self-help groups disseminate lists of the types of ghastly acts that are included under the rubric of satanic ritual abuse of children. VOICES in Action (1991), as an example, lists 36 satanic cults rituals involving children, any one a horror story in and of itself. The list includes: necrophilia, isolation in cages or caskets, application of electrical charges, surgical removal of breast nipples, and forced childbirth for young girls chosen by the cult to be "breeders" of babies for human sacrifices.

Clinical case studies also underscore the horror of satanic ritual abuse, but often add the dimension of the initial incredulity of the treating professional. Feldman (1993) illustrates this in a case study of her treatment of an adult survivor:

Barbara's telling me about being buried alive with snakes and left alone all night pushed me to look at my own powers of denial. These things were simply too strange and horrible to accept. I didn't want to believe that anyone could treat a small child in that way. My mind was like software unable to process information that had never been part of the program. (p. 48)

Adding the dimension of initial incredulity is an interesting and effective rhetorical strategy. It creates a sympathetic alliance with disbelievers, and resolves through example some of the dissonance they may be experiencing between knowing that there

is such a thing as child abuse, yet not wanting to believe that it is being perpetrated in such a terrible way by satanic cultists.

Numeric Estimates. Horror stories give life to the problem of satanic ritual abuse of children, and numeric estimates give it dimension. Numbers should constitute a problem for claims-makers; those that are bandied about vary widely and are wholly unsubstantiated. Yet this seems only to lend support to claims-makers' assertions that the satanic ritual abuse of children is a social problem like no other—a "perfectly hidden evil" (Summit, 1994, p. 399) that continuously defies any real attempts to objectively assess it.

Estimates of the number of diabolic satanic cults in this country, and of the number of practicing cultists, usually are taken by claims-makers from the anti-cult literature put out by religious publishing houses. These vary widely from 500 to 8,000 satanic cults nationwide, with from 100,000 to over a million members (Brennan, 1989; Dumont & Altesman, 1989; Schwarz & Empey, 1988).

Estimates of the number of children who have been ritually abused are even less specific. Claims-makers insist that the lack of a centralized data collection system, the poor training of psychotherapists in diagnosing satanic ritual abuse and of law enforcement officers in investigating it, the trauma suffered by survivors that hinders convincing disclosures and even precludes their coming forward in the first place, and the widespread cultural denial that such a problem even exists, all conspire to frustrate efforts to determine just how many children have been ritually abused (Cozolino, 1989; Gould, 1992; Kelley, 1989; Rogers, 1992). Some claims-makers, however, guesstimate that there have been tens of thousands of victims over the last several decades in this country alone (DeMause, 1994; Hammond, 1992). In contrast, many others finesse the estimation problem by insisting that numbers become meaningless in the face of the horrific nature of the abuse. In the words of Braun (1988): "If even 10% of this stuff is true, then we're in big trouble."

While there is some disagreement among claims-makers as to numeric estimates of the problem, there is a widespread consensus that the problem is growing. Satanic ritual abuse of children is described as a national epidemic "that is growing faster than

AIDS" (Raschke, 1990, p. 56), and as "the most serious threat to children and to society that we must face in our lifetime" (Office of Criminal Justice Planning, State of California, 1990, p. 39). Even pleas for restraint in the face of this purported social problem carry the intimation that it is growing. Braun (1992) warns:

I caution people against panic. If there truly is an international organization [of satanic cults], it has been around longer than we have. If it's running not only our society, but the world economy, then it has been doing it for a long time and neither you nor I are going to be able to change it.

Warrants

Warrants are statements that bridge the gap between grounds and conclusions, thus legitimizing demands for action (Toulmin, 1958). Implicit in nature, they usually are offered as self-evident truths that require little if any discussion, and no debate. It is in the warrants that the values of claims-makers become most evident, and these values, in turn, can be used as resources by the claims-makers in the ongoing construction of a social problem (Spector & Kitsuse, 1973). The implicit nature of warrants renders them somewhat difficult to analyze, but some overlapping value themes emerge from a careful reading of the claims being made about satanic ritual abuse of children.

Value of Children. Claims-makers allege that the very characteristics which make children so sentimentally valuable in this culture—their purity and innocence—also makes them desirable to diabolic satanic cults. The blood and the bodies of young children are described as filled with the vibrant life energy that cultists must appropriate, through the ceremonial process of ritual abuse, in their quest for personal power (Gould, 1992; Hudson, 1991; Kahaner, 1988; Katchen & Sackheim, 1992; MARC, 1991). That claims-makers also insist that many of the children who are procured for ritual abuse by cultists are "throw-aways" from violent or neglecting families, orphans, patients in psychiatric hospitals, and commodities sold by their avaricious parents (Coleman, 1994; Larson, 1989; Michaelson, 1989; Schwarz & Empey, 1988), only underscores the implicit warrant that well-protected and well cared for children are this culture's most valuable resource.

And they also are this culture's future. That the experience of satanic ritual abuse renders children incapable of functioning well in this post-modern culture is emphasized often by claims-makers. Gould (1992), for example, list dozens of behavioral, emotional, and physical sequelae of satanic ritual abuse, any one of which very well might functionally incapacitate a child for most of his or her life. The list includes debilitating phobias, violent behavior, severe learning disorders, suicidal ideation and behavior, and chronic psychosomatic illnesses. The threat that satanic ritual abuse poses to the future also is emphasized by the dire prognosis given to victimized children. On this point Hudson (1994, p. 75) states, "Whereas I used to think two or three years of therapy would suffice for ritually abused children in most cases, I now believe it might take a lifetime."

Value of Believing the Victim. Claims-makers often create a sociohistorical context for their claims by reminding their audience that in not too recent history the allegations of victims of more common and prosaic forms of child abuse, especially sexual abuse, were heard with skepticism, at best, and not believed at worst. Victims, consequently, were deprived of the opportunity to express their pain and, ultimately, to heal. This conspiracy of silence, as Herman (1992) refers to it, disturbingly linked otherwise well-meaning people with perpetrators of child abuse, a link that in the case of satanic ritual abuse can be broken, according to claims-makers, if the value of believing the victim is stressed. Sinason (1994, p. 4-5) states that:

[Satanic ritual abuse victims] share a "double trauma." Like many others they have been victims of sexual, emotional and physical abuse . . . However, the secondary trauma is often a harder one. With a few notable exceptions, nobody can bear to believe the real nature of what these survivors have experienced . . . (O)ur patients suffer from societal disbelief.

Value of Social Order. Claims-makers allege that the satanic ritual abuse of children is inextricably entwined with a number of "evils" that threaten the social order. For example, the uses of ritually abused children in pornography produced and sold by the cults, and in prostitution, is described by many claims-makers (Coleman, 1994; Kaye & Klein, 1987; Lundberg-Love, 1988).

Some claims-makers, however, are beginning to describe a more insidious threat to social order and stability that is posed by satanic ritual abuse of children. Because these children supposedly are thoroughly indoctrinated into satanic cults practices and ideology, they are described as posing a significant threat to society at large during their adulthood (Braun, 1992; Kaye & Klein, 1987; Lundberg-Love, 1988; Ryder, 1992). Hammond (1992) makes this point most forcefully when he insists that the purpose of satanic ritual abuse of children is to "create tens of thousands of mental robots who will do pornography, prostitution, smuggle drugs, engage in international arms smuggling. Eventually those at the top of the satanic cult want to create a satanic order that will rule the world."

Value of Vigilance. Claims-makers explain that children have been ritually abused for decades in this country because satanic cultists are otherwise respectable members of society. Few people, therefore, unless they are extraordinarily vigilant, would even suspect that such horrific acts could be conducted by those who otherwise live such regular, even exemplary, lives. This banality of evil claim is illustrated by Braun's (1992) "Rule of P's" that describes the real identities of many secret satanic cultists: physicians, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, principals and teachers, pallbearers (undertakers), public workers, police, politicians and judges, priests and clergies from all religions.

Particular vigilance in regards to daycare and preschool personnel started being stressed by claims-makers during the infamous McMartin Preschool case in which teachers were accused of sexually abusing over the years hundreds of children who had been entrusted to their care. The satanic overtones of this case were heard again and again in the dozens of daycare/preschool cases that followed over the years (Hollingsworth, 1986; Manshel, 1990; Waterman, Kelly, Oliveri, & McCord, 1993). In testimony before Congress, the social worker responsible for interviewing most of the children in the McMartin case warned:

I believe we're dealing with an organized operation of child predators designed to prevent detection. The preschool, in such a case, serves as a ruse for a larger, unthinkable network of crimes against children. If such an operation involves child pornography or selling of children, as is frequently alleged, it may have greater financial,

legal and community resources at its disposal than those attempting to expose it. ("McMartin Case," 1984)

Value of the Spiritual Order. With the notable exception of religious fundamentalists who have been active claims-makers over the last fifteen years, most claims-makers have been careful not to express unabashedly sectarian views about satanic ritual abuse of children. Satan, of course, is a powerful metaphor for evil in a Judeo-Christian culture (Russell, 1988), and satanic ritual abuse is an irresistible metaphor for a heretical force aimed at the very spiritual foundation of society. Yet the value of preserving and protecting that spiritual foundation is only an oblique theme that runs through many claims.

Satanic cults rituals, for example, often are described as inversions of sacred Christian rituals (Hill & Goodwin, 1989; McShane, 1993; Smith & Pazder, 1980), and ritual abuse is depicted as having a devastating impact on the spiritual development of the child (Gould, 1992; Hudson, 1994; Young, 1992). Many claims-makers also assert that the primary goal of diabolic satanic cults is to dominate the world, thereby replacing a Judeo-Christian spiritual order with what Mollon (1994, p. 140) describes as "an alternative world of permissiveness, power and magic—constructed of lies and asserted as an alternative to the laws of 'God the Father.'"

Conclusions

In Toulmin's (1958) scheme for analyzing the structure of an argument, conclusions are the calls for action that collectively comprise the claims-makers' agenda for redressing, resolving, or even eliminating the problem at hand. In regards to the problem of satanic ritual abuse of children, these calls are directed towards a social audience composed of professionals, laypersons and children, and are embodied in fifteen years of activity on the parts of claims-makers.

The first call is for awareness. As a constructed social problem, satanic ritual abuse of children has a unique feature that makes attempts to bring it into public awareness particularly problematic. According to claims-makers, it is and has been for decades a hidden social problem, kept from public view by conspiratorial forces. Bringing it into public awareness, then, entails some degree of physical risk for claims-makers (Hammond, 1992; Mollon,

1994), and psychic risks for the social audience which must work through its own incredulity and denial to come to the realization that such a threat exists to children. Despite these alleged risks, or perhaps because of them, claims-makers have been quite successful in using such diverse media as film, television, books, as well as professional and community seminars to raise public awareness of their claims (Mulhern, 1991; Victor, 1993).

Claims-makers also call for prevention, however this conclusion is not without its own problem: the typifying examples offered in the construction of this social problem preclude any real possibility of prevention. If children are born into satanic cults, kidnapped or otherwise forcefully procured for the purpose of ritual abuse (Coleman, 1994; Young, Sachs, Braun, & Watkins, 1991), then little can be done to prevent their victimization. Claims-makers, therefore, have aimed prevention efforts at certain features of the popular culture that, in their opinion, insidiously weaken the values of the individual, and of the culture at large, thus rendering both susceptible to satanic cult influences. Heavy metal music, fantasy role-playing games, horror films, occult literature, "new age" religions and personal growth movements all have been targeted by claims-makers over the years (Larson, 1989; Mendenhall, 1990; Raschke, 1990; Sinason, 1994). Such prevention efforts occasionally, and probably unintentionally, have spurred efforts in some communities to censor certain books and films, especially in public school settings, and have been the bases of civil suits against fantasy role-playing games manufacturers, and even against heavy metal rock groups for influencing young listeners, through lyrics or record jacket art, to commit antisocial, illegal, or self-injurious acts (Richardson, 1991; Victor, 1993).

The final call is for the enactment of social control policies, and it is in the arena of the law that claims-makers have been most successful in bringing about changes. By defining and typifying this alleged social problem in the most horrific of terms, they have been able to turn satanic ritual abuse of children into what Nelson (1984, p. 27) refers to as a "valence issue," one that elicits "a strong, fairly uniform emotional response." As a consequence, many states across the country have revised their existing criminal statutes, or passed new laws, that specifically prohibit and heavily penalize ritual abuse.

But this call for social control is not without its problems. Religious beliefs, no matter how distasteful, are constitutionally protected (*U.S. v. Ballard*, 1944), therefore these new laws cannot specifically criminalize the practice of satanism. In order to protect children, however, the laws prohibit their abuse within the much broader context of *any* ceremony, rite, initiation, performance or practice. This potentially invites the law to overreach into all religious and spiritual belief systems (Lanning, 1992). Further, in an effort to target what claims-makers insist are the ceremonial acts that attend the ritual abuse of children, these laws also criminalize mutilation, dismemberment, torture, and human sacrifice—acts that already are prohibited by extant criminal and child protection laws (Ogloff & Pfeifer, 1992). While claims-makers' urgent press for new legislation responds to the nature of the social problem they have constructed, such broadly written and reiterative new laws end up having more symbolic than utilitarian value (de-Young, 1994).

Discussion

The use of Toulmin's (1958) scheme for categorizing claims reveals some interesting features about the problem of satanic ritual abuse of children. Its grounds, that is, the facts and the data that support it, are weak, contradictory, unsubstantiated, and uncorroborated by external evidence (Goodman, Qin, Bottoms, & Shaver, 1995; Hicks, 1991; Lanning, 1992). Its conclusions appear unimaginative and ineffectual in the face of what claims-makers are describing as such an urgent social problem (deYoung, 1995; Ofshe & Watters, 1994). Commonsense would predict that the claims being made about satanic ritual abuse of children would not be particularly persuasive, and that the problem would have only a brief natural history in what increasingly has become a competitive social problems marketplace (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988).

Commonsense, however, very well may not recognize that it is a resonance between warrants, those implicit and "self-evident truths" offered by claims-makers, and prevailing cultural concerns that largely accounts for the persuasiveness, and the persistence, of claims about satanic ritual abuse of children. A

necessarily brief examination of two prevailing cultural concerns will frame this discussion about the link between rhetoric and cultural context.

Cultural Concern About Vulnerable Children

Over the decades since the turn of the century, children increasingly have been seen as innocent and in need of protection. No longer economically useful, they have become sentimentally valuable (Zelizer, 1985). With that ideological shift in attitudes about children, the family was idealized as the safe haven where the task of socialization is lovingly carried out. Over recent years, however, some previously ignored and ugly realities of family life—incest, physical abuse, emotional neglect—were being exposed, and the family was being redefined as a potentially dangerous place for children. Best (1990) notes that when such a cultural concern about the vulnerability of children to abuse within their own families increases, an appeal to the value of children becomes a convincing warrant in any kind of claims-making activity, satanic ritual abuse certainly no exception.

This cultural concern has intensified over recent years with the conversion of traditional family functions into contractually provided services. This conversion is the result of the strain between what Bromley and Busching (1991) term covenantal and contractual social relations, that is, between family and economy. Changes in the family, most particularly in the number of dual-career families, are contracting covenantal relations and expanding contractual relations, with the result that the delicate and crucial task of socializing children and inculcating them with morals and values increasingly is being reduced to the terms of contracts made by parents with such agents as daycare and preschool providers, babysitters, and teachers. This transformation not only increases the persuasiveness of any claims-makers' appeal to the value of children, but also resonates well with the warrant about the value of vigilance. That warrant, incidentally, is emphatically stressed by claims-makers in the case of the satanic ritual abuse of children problem, and legitimizes their calls for awareness and increased social control as well.

Those same claims-makers also appeal to the value of believing the victim, a warrant that has become more persuasive over

recent years with the growing cultural concern about the link between child abuse and trauma. That link, however, was not forged until attitudes about the believability of abuse allegations, and about the credibility of victims as witnesses to their own experiences, had been transformed (Herman, 1992). As the culture gained more experience in listening to and believing the victims of other, more prosaic, forms of child abuse, there was an increased readiness to do the same with claims about satanic ritual abuse (deYoung, 1993; Nathan, 1991).

Cultural Concern About a Satanic Menace

At the same time that a cultural concern about the vulnerability of children to abuse was emerging, so was another about the menace to society posed by satanism. While there is historical evidence of the existence of groups covertly organized around the worship of Satan (Russell, 1988), most modern images of satanism have come from pulp fiction and horror films. But over the last fifteen years or so, satanism not only has come to be regarded as real, but as threatening to both the social and the spiritual order.

Religious fundamentalism has played a major role in that transformation (Jenkins & Maier-Katkin, 1992; Victor, 1994). Recently distinguished by its vast infrastructure of television and radio programs, publications, audio and video tapes, the messages of religious fundamentalism reach a wide and receptive audience. Primary to fundamentalist doctrine is the assertion that Satan exercises a real and evil power in this world that threatens the spiritual order. The wide array of social problems and ills that plague the culture are put in evidence of that power, as is the rise of the occult and of New Age religions. In regards to that latter piece of evidence, Jenkins and Maier-Katkin (1992) write: "For the fundamentalists of the last two decades, New Age and mystical movements have been the Devil's Trojan Horse in the subversion of America, a means to introduce the gullible young to anti-Christian concepts and practices" (p. 63).

Such purported widespread evidence of Satan's power further supports another central tenet of fundamentalist belief: that a return to traditional spiritual values is the only antidote to Satan's power. Such a moral crusade necessarily secularizes fundamentalist beliefs and further extends the authority of religious

leaders into the public realm. As Jenkins and Maier-Katkin (1992) point out, "A campaign against 'satanism' would in reality be a sweeping endeavor to remold American social life on the lines advocated by fundamentalists and extreme conservatives" (p. 65).

All of this certainly creates an engendering context for claims about satanic ritual abuse of children. Not only does it provide the frame of reference for interpreting the claims, but it also makes the claims believable as the most evil example of Satan's influence in the world. The warrant about the value of the spiritual order becomes powerfully persuasive under these conditions, as do the claims-makers' calls for prevention efforts aimed at restoring traditional spiritual values.

The warrant about the value of social order also is convincing because it resonates with another, related cultural concern about the link between satanism and crime. Through the interchangeable use of the terms "occult" and "satanic," such crimes as grave desecration, animal mutilation, vandalism, kidnapping, and even some types of murder, were linked to the practices of satanic cults (Lanning, 1992; Richardson, 1991). Claims about satanic ritual abuse of children with all of its attendant criminal practices became plausible in this context, and claims-makers' warrant about the value of social order became persuasive in the light of its resonance with this cultural concern.

Summary

This paper uses Toulmin's (1958) scheme to conduct a rhetorical analysis of claims being made in the construction of the satanic ritual abuse of children problem. The analysis reveals that the persistence of these claims over the last fifteen years is the product not of their compelling facts or their effective conclusions, but of their persuasive warrants. These implicit, "self-evident truths" resonate well with recent cultural concerns about the vulnerability of children to abuse, and the satanic cult menace.

Best, whose rhetorical analysis of claims made in the construction of the missing children problem guided the analysis of this paper, raises a disturbing question about the public opinion and policy consequences of social problems constructed around the image of threatened children:

A society which is mobilized to keep child molesters, kidnappers, and satanists away from innocent children is not necessarily prepared to protect children from ignorance, poverty, and ill health. Inevitably, some campaigns succeed in the social problems marketplace. Whether the most significant issues come to the fore is another question. (1990, p. 188)

After fifteen years of the active construction of satanic ritual abuse of children as a social problem, that question has yet to be answered.

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