Stop the Panic
April 8, 2005 in Child safeguarding, Looked after children, Sexual exploitation

Jean La Fontaine is professor emeritus of social anthropology at the London School of Economics. She has done fieldwork in Africa and the UK. She has published a book on children’s sexual abuse and the Department of Health funded her research on ritual and organised abuse.

From the late 1980s onwards there has been a fear that groups of adults were conspiring to prey on vulnerable children. Mostly they were thought to be paedophiles who were sexually interested in children; homosexual paedophiles caused particular anxiety.

There were also allegations across Britain concerning groups of men and women who abused young children of both sexes during devil worship rituals and sacrificed them to Satan. (1) The secrecy of the groups contributed to the fear because it implied they had the power and intelligence to frustrate attempts to find them or protect children from them.

Most of the children concerned in cases where ritual or satanic abuse was alleged were already in care. There was evidence that some had been sexually or physically abused and many perpetrators were jailed. Those convicted were not proved to be members of devil-worshipping cults. Moreover there was a complete lack of evidence to support the more extreme allegations, which caused sceptics to doubt them. (2) Those who did believe asserted that children did not lie about the sexual abuse they suffered and, like rape victims, they had the right to be believed. Indeed an American organisation canvassing for these allegations to be accepted called itself Believe the Children.

There was some scepticism concerning ritual abuse within the social work profession. In order to avoid a damaging dispute within its ranks as to the validity of the claims, the term “organised abuse” was adopted. This term as it has subsequently been used might refer either to groups of paedophiles or to satanic cults and was often used as a euphemism for the latter. Both usages carried the implication of a group of people whose wicked practices were planned and secret.

The term organised abuse however blurred the differences between the two types. Where satanic abuse was alleged, parents, neighbours or other known individuals were implicated and the informants were mostly children, although some cases in my research involved adolescents.

In the case of children’s homes – now the subject of a detailed analysis by Richard Webster (3) – those who made the allegations were no longer children. They had lived in children’s homes, but by the time they accused staff of abusing them they were adults. Their supporters referred to these young men as “children”, “ex-children” or even “former children” and did not check their stories. The police mostly called them witnesses.

The inconsistencies and the mistakes they made in their statements, even to the point of accusing someone who had not lived in the home at the same time as their accuser, showed these accounts to be, at best fantasies and at worst lies. The police, eager to catch a group of paedophiles, sought out former residents -a process referred to as “trawling” – and virtually asked them to make accusations. Some were even told that as victims they would be eligible for considerable compensation. It did not seem to occur to anyone that this method almost guaranteed that false allegations would be made.

In effect what the hunt for paedophile rings did was to vindicate the men and women who looked after the nation’s most deprived and
difficult children, many of them with appalling home backgrounds. If there had been any organised abuse within Wales at any time from the 1970s onwards, the massive police operations that spread throughout England and Wales must have found traces of it.

The idea that fuelled these investigations was that several accusations corroborate each other, which is quite wrong when the accounts are themselves not reliable. From what I understand, the police no longer do this. It was also assumed that victims (even self-styled ones) had the right to be believed, a point of view that is longer lasting. This assumption entails setting aside the fundamental tenet of English justice that the accused is innocent until proved guilty.

One can now state with conviction that, up until the end of the 20th century, there had been no organised abuse or even very much individual abuse in children's homes. Nor was there supporting evidence to corroborate allegations about the other form of organised abuse, satanic abuse. These allegations took two forms. Where children were concerned, in most cases it could be shown that children did not tell adults spontaneously of satanic rituals; their words were reinterpreted by adults who were already convinced that they were dealing with it and pressed children to confirm their beliefs.

The idea of satanic abuse has been kept alive by the continued allegations coming from adults, mostly women, who claim to have been abused in satanic rituals as children and who, with the help of committed supporters, have "recovered" memories of what happened.

The discovery of the mutilated body of a five year-old boy on the south bank of the Thames in September 2001 has frequently been cited as proof that satanic abuse does occur. Police investigators believe the child they named Adam is from Nigeria. It is most likely that he was killed to make powerful magic by a purveyor of such "medicines" (muti), which are known in parts of Africa although regarded as evil and forbidden. If this is so, Adam's death was not the result of a satanic ritual and may be unique in this country.

The failure to find organised abuse as defined above does not mean that such sexual abuse is impossible or will never happen. Underage prostitution is the main form of organised abuse that exists, although until relatively recently it was seen as a criminal activity and not a matter for child protection. In some cases fathers may offer their own children to other men. Girls in residential care are vulnerable to men, sometimes acting alone or with others, who persuade them to sell themselves. The prostitution of children who are kidnapped or bought abroad and trafficked into this country is a newer, additional, form of this.

Child prostitution may be organised abuse, if those who undertake it form an organisation, but these criminals are not usually paedophiles themselves. Their purpose is to make money. They resemble the organisations that bring illegal immigrants into the UK and exploit them, rather than the secret conspiracies in popular (and media-fanned) imagination. Perhaps no one wishes to recognise the uncomfortable fact that by far the largest proportion of children who are abused, are still those who suffer at the hands of their parents and neighbours.

Abstract
Investigations into children's homes have shown that the fear of paedophiles infiltrating children's homes was not supported by investigations that started in North Wales. Research into allegations of satanic abuse has also concluded that they were not founded on solid evidence. Both indicate that unsupported allegations by victims should not be treated as factual. Discussion of such investigations presents useful past experience but cannot predict the future of child protection work.

References
(3) Richard Webster, The Secret of Bryn Estyn: the Making of a Modern Witchhunt, Orwell Press, 2005

Contact the author
By email at: J.La-Fontaine@lse.ac.uk