

Satanic Abuse Claim Highlights Fallacy of ‘Recovering’ Sexual Abuse ‘Memories’

Therapists who steer clients towards recovered ‘memory’ of sexual abuse are putting the interests of their clients second to their own beliefs, with devastating consequences, claims a leading psychology academic.

His comments come at a time when the controversy about ‘satanic abuse’ – reminiscent of the stories from Orkney and Cleveland 20 years ago – has surfaced again, this time following the mysterious death of a former nurse, Carole Myers. The Sunday Times this week* reports that Myers was treated for 20 years by psychiatrists and doctors “who fostered false beliefs in her mind that she was the victim of satanic abuse”.

But Myers is not the isolated case that the article might imply: falsely recovered memory is to this day being treated as ‘proof’ of childhood abuse, despite lack of corroborating evidence and with shattering consequences for the patients and their families.

Dr Peter Naish, Visiting Reader in Psychology at the University of Sussex, states that adults who were victims of childhood sexual abuse might display psychological problems - but that having psychological problems is not a proof of sexual abuse.

He explains: “Some therapists ... are convinced that all manner of dysfunctions in adults are clear indications that they were abused.

“This reason is as foolish as the following: “People with malaria have a fever. Mary has a fever so Mary must have malaria”.

“This is a logical fallacy which has destroyed families all over the world”, he asserts. “And it continues to do so.”

Dr Naish chairs the Scientific and Professional Advisory Board - an autonomous board of advisers to the British False Memory Society (BFMS - <http://www.bfms.org.uk>). The BFMS is a charity which was formed in 1993 following reports by accused parents and which is regularly contacted, even nowadays, by parents whose adult children, after receiving therapy or counselling, discover ‘memories’ of having been sexually abused by their parents during infancy**.

Most of these families tell similar stories of a well-educated adult daughter in her late twenties or early thirties suddenly making accusations of severe childhood sexual abuse after undergoing therapy.

Families have been wrecked by the accusations and there have been recorded instances of jail sentences and convictions - which have then been quashed on appeal.

Dr Naish’s comments on Recovered Memory Therapy are made in the current issue of the British False Memory Society Newsletter***. In an article described as the ‘BFMS Position Statement on the Recovery of Memory’ he says, “Symptoms do not serve as proof of abuse.”

The Newsletter also carries an article on Carole Myers under the heading: ‘The creation of a satanic myth: an abuse of professional power’. It has been written by Carole’s brother, Dr Kevin Felstead.

Dr Naish says: “In therapy, when no memory whatsoever has been proffered, the only things that a misguided therapist can feed back are his or her own beliefs about what might have happened...

“Any therapist who persists in guiding clients towards the ‘recollection’ of denied sexual abuse is less interested in the wellbeing of the client than of the wellbeing of his or her pet theory.”

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Notes to editors:

* The Sunday Times, June 12, 2011. Article by Daniel Foggo, p. 18

** Since it was founded in 1993 the British False Memory Society (<http://www.bfms.org.uk>) has had contact with more than 2000 families affected by false memory allegations by their now adult children who have ‘discovered’ memories of sexual abuse in early childhood.

*** The full article may be read at
http://www.bfms.org.uk/Text_Assets/Position%20Statement%20pdf.pdf

About Dr Naish

Dr Peter Naish B.Sc. Dphil, C.Psychol, MBSECH is a chartered psychologist, Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine. He is the Chair of the Scientific Advisory Board of the BFMS. He was a member of the BPS Working Party set up to develop guidelines for the safe and ethical use of hypnosis. He has acted as Expert Witness at home and abroad where either 'false memory' or the misuses of hypnosis have been issues of concern. He is a Member of the Experimental Psychology Society and the British Society of Clinical and Academic Hypnosis. He is also the Visiting Reader in Psychology, The Sackler Centre for Conscious Science, at the University of Sussex

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