

**A VIOLENT STORY  
ABOUT EVIL:  
FROM THE WITCH  
HUNTS TO ORGANISED  
SADISTIC ABUSE**

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**Introduction**

I have been practising as a Social Worker for 10 years and have been working in the area of sexual assault for the past 7 years. Most of this experience was gained in Sydney, where I was employed at Central Sydney Sexual Assault Service and Dymphna House. I am currently employed at Laurel House which is a sexual assault service in Northern Tasmania.

In 2000 I completed a Masters of Letters in Peace Studies through the University of New England, NSW. I researched a historical analysis of ideas about evil in relation to the Witch Hunt Period and applied this analysis to Organised Sadistic Abuse (OSA). This paper is a condensed version of the information that I compiled through this study.

When I first began working in Sexual Assault I can remember a prolonged period of time where I experienced a very steep professional /personal learning curve. Firstly, I began to hear many stories of individual acts of human cruelty, like a father sexually abusing his daughter or a stranger raping a woman. Then I went onto learn about Satanic Ritual Abuse (now referred to as Organised Sadistic Abuse), where groups of people organise themselves over long periods of time to actively hurt groups of children and vulnerable adults.

Being confronted with so many stories of violence, I began to develop a heightened fear of human's capability to harm others and this slowly led me into unhelpful ways of thinking about people, i.e. humans are inherently evil. I decided to look further into how these types of beliefs impact on our responses to violence; this was in a search for more effective ways of supporting victims-survivors. I am hoping that this paper will stimulate some

thinking around your own personal beliefs about evil and the impact this has on your practice when working with any victim-survivor of violence.

Whilst researching a connection between ideas about evil and workers responses to OSA I found myself rethinking two main principles that underpin sexual assault services, these being; the exclusion of offenders (even if they are victims) from sexual assault services and maintaining an absolute belief in everything a victim-survivor tells you about her abuse. In relation to the first principle, by placing an evil label on offenders of OSA how then do we judge victim-survivors disclosing that dissociative parts of them are sexually abusing/killing other children? Secondly, with more knowledge about the extent to which offenders of OSA will utilise trickery and manipulation to incite fear into their victims it has also become harder for me to believe every detail of the abuse. Whilst still maintaining a core respect for such principles, throughout this paper I would like to point out the potential implications and limitations they have on our work with OSA, sexual assault and violence in general.

## **Witch-hunts and OSA Connection**

The Witch Hunt period was a significant time of history where a major level of legally sanctioned systematic violence committed against thousands of people, particularly women, took place.

There existed two predominant beliefs about evil that fuelled this mass level of violence. A belief in Maleficium involved ideas about making a choice to be evil, having intentions to harm, owning supernatural powers and adopting evil motives. A belief in Diabolism involved ideas about group satanic worship, recruitment into evil ways, being possessed by evil supernatural forces and making the choice between Satan and God.

I maintain that remnants of these two beliefs still exist today and have caused a considerable level of fear and suspicion for people in positions to assist victims-survivors of OSA. This has contributed to the denial or condoning of systematic acts of abuse and led to people disbelieving or discrediting victims' stories.

When someone says, "I believe offenders of Organised Sadistic Abuse are evil"; I find myself asking, "What do you mean?" Here are three options: a)

that these people have been over taken by an evil powerful force outside of them to the extent that they have no control over what they are doing to other people; b) that these people are born with an inherently evil nature so they can't help what they are doing; or c) that these people choose to take part in very violent actions that can be described as 'evil'.

This is a very important question for Sexual Assault Workers and for anyone who is supporting people who have experienced this form of abuse, especially when responding to those survivors who have also been made to participate in abusive actions themselves. Each of these options can have an impact on the way a person is going to respond.

For instance, if evil is believed to be a powerful force, then it has the possibility of permeating into its victims and if a worker gets close enough they may run the risk of catching it too. Alternatively, if the offender is believed to have an evil nature then this might be hereditary and the survivor may have inherited the evil 'gene'. Either of these ideas would serve to blame and re-victimise a person who has already been violated at every level of her being, as they form a connection between what she has experienced and who she is.

I believe that Sexual Assault Workers can better respond to survivors of OSA if they move away from socially constructed mystical connotations of evil and view it as a way of describing the atrocities that a person or group of people choose to commit, upon innocent victims. There is less likelihood for a survivor not to consider herself responsible for the abuse and are less prone to being judged by others.

The violence during the Witch Hunt period and today in terms of Organised Sadistic Abuse needs to be acknowledged. It is essential that this violence is no longer denied or condoned, as the reality of the harm that humanity is capable of causing needs to be faced. This needs to be acknowledged so an awareness of its impact can be gained. It is only with such awareness that action can be taken to end these vicious cycles of violence.

Acknowledging violence does not mean selecting individuals and blaming them by labeling them as evil. If one person is labeled as being inherently evil then it is possible for anyone to be viewed as evil no matter what actions they have done, as was experienced during the Witch Hunts. Labeling people as

evil does not end violence, it denies any responsibility and it gets in the way of being aware of violence as people get too frightened to look further.

The evil label does not discriminate, it can be attached to anyone, and in particular to those who are vulnerable. People start to believe that what happens to them makes them evil, witches were tortured and told that they were evil, so they believed they were and then confessed to elaborate sins. People who are violated in groups are told that they deserve this treatment because they are evil and they therefore construct ideas about themselves as being evil.

## **Methodology**

The paramount concern of this research was to identify an effective framework for responding to people who have experienced OSA. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 5 Sydney based sexual assault workers, to explore their own belief systems about evil, how these assisted and/or got in the way of responding to people in this situation. Through these interviews I have collated information from their experience that can be used as a resource for other workers in the field.

All five Sexual Assault workers were women, reflecting the significant number of females as opposed to males who were presently working in the area of sexual violence within Sydney. All consultants have had two years or more experience in working in the area of sexual assault. Whilst one was not currently working in this area, the remaining four were. All had worked or were working in the Sydney Metropolitan area, whilst two had also worked outside of this area. The five consultants had worked with a total of 142 survivors of Organised Sadistic Abuse. Given that they were working in different agencies located in the one area it is highly probable that there was a doubling up effect with this result.

These interviews were conducted in a way that gave the consultants opportunity to speak of their professional and personal experiences in this area. I wanted to capture their beliefs and insights that have sustained and nurtured them in this work so that they could be passed onto others in the field enabling them to feel less isolated and more validated in their work.

## Research Findings

The following is a summary of the consultants' responses as well as quotes to ensure that their words and experiences were captured in their entirety.

This qualitative data will be presented in 3 categories: Consultants' understanding of OSA, Connection between OSA and evil ideas, and how ideas about evil shape responses to OSA.

### 1. Consultants' understanding of OSA.

The consultants felt that the term OSA is too specific as many people assume that this is driven by a satanic ideology. Associating OSA with such a narrow religious focus gets in the way of understanding the effects of the abuse and takes away from the practices of abuse. It also gives the offenders more power as people are too scared to hear or do anything about it.

OSA should encompass all groups of people who are very good at organising themselves in ways that perpetrate crime, and that usually adopt a group mentality or ideology that allows them to justify their practices amongst each other and with their victims.

#### Responses:

*"Its come to have this meaning that's about satanic cult abuse". If someone says "I am working with OSA", you automatically think "oh yeah we're talking about some kind of Satanic, ideologically driven group."*

*In having a direct association with Satanism, the term OSA has "lost any attachment to power and control and ordinary ways that human beings operate in the world ... it holds onto all of those really scary things about the devil."*

### 2. Connection between OSA and evil ideas

The responses from consultants describe how ideas about evil have contributed to the segregation of different forms of violence. OSA has been located in a category of its own to make it "look special and different". This has resulted in a hierarchy of experiences of violence, where some are viewed as more important or worse than others. It can be argued that

experiences of OSA are viewed as different because of their association with evil.

A process of categorising violent experiences has meant that some Sexual Assault workers feel as though their responses to survivors of OSA should be completely different to the way they respond to others who have experienced sexual violence. Some workers have felt that they are not skilled enough or their agencies have not provided enough professional support to deal with this form of abuse. Such a segregation of abuse can get in the way of addressing the dynamics of power that have allowed violence to operate in the first place. Despite the misrepresentation of OSA amongst Sexual Assault workers this is still an area that requires further institutional recognition and funding.

All consultants associated either their own views or others views about OSA with the term evil. The term evil was used to describe the motives behind how people choose to engage in such violent acts.

Responses:

*The idea that evil exists was raised in relation to the importance of acknowledging the existence of OSA, "in order to believe that OSA exists then it is necessary to believe that evil exists. I probably didn't believe so much in evil's existence before working in this area but now I do, you see it more and hear it."*

*Offenders of OSA make a choice about evil in terms of a turning away; "I think these people choose to do something which is evil, and part of that choice is a turning away from having someone, turning away from light, a turning away from your own humanity because if you feel located within humanity or feel connected to the human part of who you are you are less likely to hurt others... It's like OSA is a large group of people who have chosen to turn away from something and part of what they have turned way from is compassion and a sense of connection to other people."*

*The idea of choice in relation to a continuum of actions from good to evil "there is a continuum of evil down one end and my concept of God up the other, there's all these choices we make, which either brings us closer to God or takes us further away, the more further away we get, the closer to evil we get... I think any sort of perpetrator*

*of violence is making choices to get closer to evil, that's in any form (of abuse), you know the father that rapes his daughter three times a week from the age of two to ten, he's pretty close to evil"*

*Viewing evil as a choice as opposed to an intrinsic quality; "I think Evil is a choice rather than something you are born with because I think people are much more afraid of that which we are born with because if we are born with something how can you get rid of it?"*

During the Witch Hunts an association between evil and violence was prevalent, where a belief in maleficium spoke of evil intentions of those witches who were thought to be harming others. In the same way that the harm associated with OSA as evil is also interpreted by some: that is, the intention and motives of the offenders are evil.

When this label of evil intentions is used to define a survivor's offenders, this can create some difficulty for that person, in that she still may have a connection with those people, given her possibly long-term association with them. Even though she may be moving toward a belief that their behaviour has been unacceptable, she may find it hard to hear that those closest to her are being described in value laden ways. I am not disputing this judgment if a survivor wants to adopt this for herself. However it is different if a Sexual Assault worker directly or indirectly expresses this judgment to her clients, as it is not their judgment to make. I do not come from a perspective about what is respectful to the offender; instead I am more interested in what is helpful for the survivor. Otherwise this can have the effect of her questioning herself and her experience of abuse in a negative way.

Given that there is so much morality encasing the word evil my preference is to use more descriptive ways of acknowledging violence – those which portray the effects of violence and reveal the dynamics of power, without running the risk of essentialising any individual's personality type. As it is this label of evil attached to violence that promotes rigid distinctions around victims and offenders.

### **3. How ideas about evil shape responses to OSA**

Consultants claimed that ideas about evil have impacted on their views of OSA in 5 different ways: 1) fear for their own safety; 2) sadness about the existence of OSA and the denial that comes with this; 3) apathy and real

powerlessness about not being able to stop this; 4) gaining a belief in absolute 'goodness' – by absolute goodness it can be meant at base that humans are untainted, it is systems and ideologies that effect behaviour; and 5) a curiosity about other's sense of evil.

All 5 consultants agreed that it was possible for beliefs about evil to get in the way of working with people who have experienced or continue to experience OSA. When responding to victims of OSA the following issues were identified: not believing the victim, fear stopping workers from responding altogether, not getting as involved in the work, not being able to affirm a full belief in the victim, a reluctance to hear sexual details and difficulty accepting victims who have also abused others.

Other issues which were raised in relation to workers responses were the fear of: not knowing how they will actually respond to it, of cracking them up, of having a break down in the way that they see the world and of making things worse for the survivor. Workers' reluctance to hear the "depraved and sadistic" details of the sexual violence also gets in the way of responding. These responses were drawn from their personal experiences, from their speculation of colleagues' experiences, and reading in the area.

The following data is a list of comments that were made about ways of viewing the dilemmas around experiencing fear, maintaining belief of survivors, and working with victims who have offended.

### Fear

Fear associated with OSA allows it to continue: "I think that's where the use of spiritual is helpful, it allows OSA to continue to operate, because I think that it scares people, it's very scary anything to do with God and the Devil." Fear of the evil element also allows OSA groups to gain power through the stereotypes of evil in mainstream society, "because when it's just your average bloke in the street who is participating in all this stuff he is not under suspicion at all."

Evil associations with OSA in connection with fear, leads to a denial that this level of violence exists: "I think that people get very scared of this mix up of sex and torture and judgment and salvation, and good and evil, its all very much too messy, lets run away from it, it is too hard, people do not want to have to believe it." One response from a position of denial is to claim that

victims-survivors of OSA are experiencing a “psychosis or just the fragmentation of trauma.”

It was highlighted in this study that workers should not feel entitled to have fear and not allow this to get in the way of responding: “I do not know what it is like to be in that moment of being abused but that is not my fear as a worker to have, that is the fear that they experience, I have a sense of not wanting to take that from them, it is not my place to have that. I do not feel entitled to have that because it is not me that is going through it.”

A suggestion was made to other workers by a worker: “Don’t just get freaked out by it, it is not scary in the sense that we are taught to believe that it is scary, it is scary in a different sense. It is more widespread than it is talked about and it is also silenced and covered up. The fear and the scariness allow it to keep happening because it shuts us up if we start to get fearful and feel threatened ourselves.” She went onto say: “ Be afraid of the real stuff but find out what the real stuff is first because then you feel more empowered by it, if you know what you are dealing with, you can work out ways to deal with it instead of it being unknown.”

### *Maintaining Belief*

In this study the issue of belief was raised, where by not believing in the existence of OSA and evil, leads to a worker discrediting the victim’s experiences. One consultant spoke of a belief that has helped her in her work “That what people were telling me that happened to them was the truth.” She went onto to say that, “If you do believe in it then what that does is challenges every level of your being, I believe it shatters your world view of humanity and your world view of things that are precious.”

Another person spoke of believing stories of violence via the process of remembering: “In terms of the Holocaust, was the importance of remembering what has happened, remembering in order to honour the people that went through it but remember in order to make sure it does not happen again and part of that remembering is that you have to see it, you have to know about it, you have to educate yourself about it and you have to talk about it, you can’t pretend, you can’t deny, you can’t turn away from it. I don’t think you should immerse yourself in it all day everyday... but that means you have to educate yourself about it and that means that you have to listen and basically it means that you have to bear witness.”

All consultants referred to the difficulty of maintaining a 'full' belief, that is a struggle with believing everything an OSA survivor discloses about her abuse, particularly in relation to details that are physically impossible. Sometimes these disclosures have "a lot to do with manipulation and trickery" but they don't take away from her belief that this person has suffered some form of extreme violence.

### **Working with victims who have offended**

Survivors of OSA are forced with the threat of physical danger to abuse other people. This is then used at a later stage, as 'proof' that they are in fact evil and deserve to be abused themselves. It is also used as a threat to keep victims in abusive situations: "if you leave I'll tell people what you have done." The dynamic of power here is forcing a person to make false choices so that they feel they have some control over their life and therefore assume blame for their situation. It is important for Sexual Assault workers to be reminded of this so that they can assist a person in challenging self-blame and responsibility.

It can be challenging to work with victims of OSA who had been forced to abuse others, one consultant said " because they talk about things they believe they have done like killing people and sexually assaulting other people, it is not helpful for me to think about evil in the classic definition of it because if I did it would be easy for me to put them in that same category."

Another person spoke of her dilemma in working with people who have been made to hurt others and a useful way she has learnt to deal with this situation: "For me, the thing that I have struggled the most with is a belief or a suspected belief that there are parts of a woman that are cult loyal, that are actually doing some of the terrible stuff. But I don't essentially believe that the core part of who that person is, wants to do what they have done. So what I have held onto is that the things they have had to do are false choices. Basically I believe I have to work out where in that person is whole and is beautiful in order to believe that the person is going to be able to see that within themselves."

### **Suggestions**

Consultants suggested the following strategies to assist others in their work with survivors of OSA: to maintain a personal commitment in looking after

themselves, to ask what they want to get out of this work before they begin, to recognise their personal strengths, to ensure that they have supportive people around them, and gain a healthy balance between their work and personal life.

Consultants also suggested that gaining an understanding of the issues associated with DID; getting professional clinical consultancy, debriefing, training and doing lots of reading in the area of OSA, can help in responding effectively to survivors. One person suggested that it is important, “to ensure that you have as many layers of support around you as possible”, whilst another recommended to “get more informal peer networks of others who are working in the area.” It was also suggested that work places should invite conversations about how this work affects workers’ spiritually and personally: “it would be nice to be able to have these conversations (referring to this interview) in a workplace or debriefing; you sometimes do in an ‘ad hoc’ sort of way, but it would be nice for that to be structured.”

## **Personal and Spiritual Belief Systems of Sexual Assault Workers**

The consultants in this study spoke about how their frameworks for viewing the world had to be readjusted in order to assist them in comprehending the sheer extremity of this violence. One person said that “ it is through working with women who have experienced OSA that ultimately pushed me down my own spiritual path and seeing evil has made me think, I do not want to be on that side, I want to be on the other side.”

Another person said that re-adjusting her belief system about the world meant “going right back to any Christian/spiritual beliefs or teachings you have had from childhood... it is like dragging them up from your toes, bringing them out onto the table, putting them under a microscope to examine them... It was like I dissected every view, belief, information that I ever held about good versus evil.”

Within this work it is important to take time to explore personal belief systems. One person said: “Personally and spiritually people need to get a grip on what their concepts of evil are, evil and good, and protection...I think people really need to sit down and think about what life means to them, and how they are

going to cope with knowing that this exists and why they want to work in the area and what they are going to do to help themselves.”

It is my hope that this paper is perceived as an invitation for all of us working in the areas of sexual assault and violence to rethink and explore those principles which underpin our practice philosophy. As stated in the beginning of this presentation, the exclusion of offenders and the ‘total’ acceptance of people’s stories as being ‘truth’ in an absolute sense, needs to be questioned and explored so that we can move forward with those who privilege us by telling of their experiences.

As workers we need to afford each other the respect we afford our clients by allowing for diversity of opinion. I believe honest conversations help us to maintain ethical and accountable practice, “speaking out loud” the contradictions of the complex nature of sexual assault disclosures that go against the grain need to happen in safe contexts.