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For they know (not) what they do: German studies on mind control, targeted personality splitting and induced amnesias.

A reply to the critique by Schröder et al. (2023).

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In our 2023 paper by Niehaus and Krause, we aimed to demonstrate how certain representatives in social sciences, psychiatry, and psychotherapy, who were well-connected, challenged the use of scientifically-based methods in sex criminal proceedings with questionable arguments. This group advocated for a psychotraumatological perspective in criminal proceedings, all while ignoring empirical facts, including the presence of false memories. Within this group, a subgroup appeared in our view especially questionable as they proposed the existence of mind control through planned personality splitting and induced amnesia, along with the targeted control of personality states in the context of organized ritual sexual abuse (ORA). As elaborated in our original paper, the research group led by Briken played a crucial role in substantiating these questionable arguments with what they considered scientific evidence.

The recent claim by Schröder et al. (2023) that they never asserted the existence of the phenomenon under investigation is inconsistent with their own prior publications. For instance, they explicitly discussed the necessity of “educational outreach” and the development of a new narrative that challenges the prevailing “narrative of ritual abuse,” characterized by “disbelief”. They argued that this narrative delays the scientific study of this form of abuse and obstructs the discovery of ORA structures (Schröder et al., 2020, p. 250; these as well as all the following German-language quotations were translated by the authors). Such claims, detached from evidence, are already having

real-world implications in both legal and therapeutic contexts.

In their present critique of Niehaus and Krause (2023), Schröder et al. (2023) argue that our accusations are unjustified. In this response, we aim to demonstrate that, contrary to their claims, Schröder et al. (2023) have, through their arguments, inadvertently highlighted the research group’s apparent omission of the existing body of research on ORA and false memories in their published works. To help readers understand the critique presented by Schröder et al. (2023) and our subsequent response, it is essential to provide a brief contextual explanation that served as the foundation for the arguments put forth by Niehaus and Krause (2023). Subsequently, we will demonstrate why the new argumentation strategies employed by Schröder et al. (2023) are misleading.

On the context of the article by Niehaus and Krause (2023)

The article by Niehaus and Krause (2023) addresses the complexities surrounding sex criminal proceedings where, in the absence of clear evidence, two critical errors must be avoided. These errors include: (1) The risk of incorrectly deeming statements from genuine victims as false, which can lead to (a) the failure to convict actual perpetrators and (b) a failure to acknowledge the real suffering of victims. (2) The risk of mistakenly accepting false statements as credible, potentially resulting in (a) the wrongful conviction of innocent individuals and (b) the reinforcement of false memories. Both errors can inflict significant harm. To mitigate such errors and alleviate the resulting suffering, it is imperative in sex offence proceedings to maintain open-ended.

In their work, Niehaus and Krause (2023) have identified five key factors that can mitigate the likelihood of errors within sex offence proceedings. These factors

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include elements such as the comprehensive training of legal professionals and the strict separation of counseling or therapy from the process of diagnostic clarification of a suspected abuse. Conversely, Niehaus and Krause (2023) have also brought to attention five concerning developments that appear to be moving in the opposite direction. These developments involve issues such as unsubstantiated claims regarding trauma memories and a denial of the phenomenon of false memories. If not addressed, these developments could jeopardize the progress achieved by a science-based approach in the coming years, potentially to the disadvantage of alleged victims.

The publications authored by Briken, Schröder, and their colleagues (e.g., Nick et al., 2018; Schröder et al., 2020) contribute to the regressive trend by presenting what appears to be scientific support for the existence of mind control. A fundamental characteristic of organized ritual sexual abuse (ORA) involving mind control is the deliberate splitting of the victim's personality, which allows the perpetrators to exert control and induce amnesia. This phenomenon was thoroughly investigated by Briken and colleagues and explicitly defined as 'mind control' in the initial questionnaire instructions of the research group's inaugural empirical study (Nick et al., 2018). Through their survey methodology, the research group was able to substantiate their assumptions regarding the existence of this phenomenon, with 129 out of 165 respondents reporting a deliberate splitting of their personality into "internal parts with specific functions" (Nick et al., 2018, p. 252). "On average, the onset of violence was reported to occur at the age of 3, and participants indicated becoming aware of their ORA experiences at the age of 29" (Schröder et al., 2021, p. 24).

The research group, in its classification of findings, appears to overlook significant issues within its methodological approach and neglects the insights offered by psychology of memory (BDP, 2023; DGPs, 2023; Mokros, 2023; Niehaus & Krause, 2023). Furthermore, it seems to disregard the potential adverse implications for practical applications that may arise when scientific publications provide inconclusive evidence for phenomena such as mind control, targeted personality splitting, and induced amnesias. Nevertheless, the group led by Briken and Schröder derived specific legal implications from their methodologically questionable studies. For example, they suggest the necessity of an 'adjustment' of credibility assessments in cases of suspected ORA (Schröder et al., 2020, p. 257f.).

State of research on ORA

In response to the critique presented by Schröder et al. (2023), we first provide a summary of the current state of research within the context of ORA (Mokros, 2023). To maintain brevity and avoid redundancy in this reply, we refrain from reiterating references to the literature and direct readers to the original contribution by Niehaus and Krause (2023).

- (1) Sexual abuse of children is a widespread issue with severe health consequences.
- (2) Organized structures facilitating child sexual abuse exist and have been discovered both internationally and in German-speaking countries.
- (3) Manipulative techniques are employed in cases of sexual abuse.
- (4) Ideological groups commit offenses and provide ideological justification for their actions.
- (5) However, there is no scientific evidence confirming organized ritual abuse involving mind control, targeted personality splitting and induced amnesias.
- (6) Experience reports of organized ritual abuse with mind control and targeted personality splitting have been available for decades, often associated with suggestive processes and the involvement of certain psychotherapists.
- (7) Empirical evidence supports the occurrence of false memories, which can be induced in therapies (Otgaar et al., 2021). The phenomenon of false memories is not solely iatrogenic, as autosuggestion also plays a significant role in their formation.
- (8) Research on memory of traumata suggests that individuals tend to remember traumatic events well but have difficulty forgetting them.
- (9) Empirical findings contradict the concept of specific trauma memory where absolute amnesia is considered normal, leading to potentially harmful therapies and legal actions against therapists inducing false memories related to organized ritual abuse.

Six arguments by Schröder et al. (2023) in response to Niehaus and Krause (2023)

The research by Briken, Schröder, and colleagues, including works such as Nick et al. (2018), seems to overlook the existing body of research related to points 5 to 9. In the following sections, we will elucidate this by examining six arguments presented by Schröder et al. (2023) in response to Niehaus and Krause (2023) with reference to other publications by the same research group, including Schröder et al. (2020).

1) Gaps in the scientific literature

Schröder et al. (2023) allude to an asserted research gap, stating: “The work of the Independent Inquiry was thus challenged by the demands of this group on the one hand and the gaps in scientific literature on the other. Hence, an examination of ‘organized and ritual abuse’ in Germany was commissioned by the Independent Inquiry through a research group.” Briken himself became a part of the Independent Inquiry in 2016 and was tasked with conducting the study. Schröder et al. (2023) posit that there exists a contradiction between firsthand reports of organized ritual abuse and the state of scientific research. However, it remains unclear what specific gaps in the scientific literature are being referenced. Contrary to this suggestion, research on this matter has been ongoing since the 1980s and 1990s, and none of those studies confirmed the existence of mind control. Consequently, publications addressing the absence of evidence for reports of organized ritual abuse were already available at that time (summarized by McNally, 2003). Schröder et al. (2023) chose to exclude these sources and even explicitly questioned their validity. The mere reproduction of subjective experience reports in the research group’s own publications does not contribute to resolving the purported contradictions.

Neither their publications nor Schröder et al.’s critique (2023) provide an explanation as to why international findings should not be applicable to the German-speaking world. International research has consistently found that, despite extensive scientific and forensic efforts, no evidence supporting organized ritual abuse (ORA) with mind control has been discovered. Instead of addressing this critical issue, the research group’s primary objective seems to be raising awareness. “According to a statement by the UBSKM’s Victims Council on the Handling of Ritual Violence, a narrative about ritual violence has existed for 20 years, which is characterized by disbelief and thus delays a scientific study of this form of violence and makes it difficult to obtain adequate help ... The aim of this study is to work on this narrative and to provide educational outreach. To this end, it is important to find out why structures of organized and ritual violence remain largely hidden and which factors contribute to it from the point of view of the affected persons” (Schröder et al., 2020, p. 250). Notably, there appears to be no distinct separation between the research group’s goals and those of their client. Furthermore, it remains unclear what gaps in research are being referred to. *The study does not directly address existing research findings*, but rather seems to be focused on developing a new narrative to counteract the current state of skepticism surrounding unproven criminal offenses.

2) Misinterpretation of results

As per Schröder et al. (2023), there is an alleged misinterpretation of their results: “Niehaus and Krause state that ‘Nick et al.’s (2018) conclusions claim to describe a real phenomenon’. However, there is no such claim in the criticized article. The results are described and interpreted as reports of self-identified survivors instead of scientific or legal evidence for the existence of organized and ritual abuse” (Schröder et al., 2023). The research group refrains from making any judgments on the actual content of reality. In an interview with SPIEGEL, Peer Briken expressed an opinion similar to that of Schröder et al. (2023): “At no point did they claim to present facts. He himself did not have any scientific evidence for techniques such as mind control or the deliberate splitting of personality. And if the results of his research group were nevertheless interpreted as evidence for the existence of ritual violence? ‘Unfortunately, it is impossible to prevent the misuse of research results’” (SPIEGEL, 11/2023, dated 12.3.2023).

In the publications of the research group, there are indeed indications that the statements of those affected are subjectively processed. However, the remaining formulations are chosen in a way that the assumption of a connection to reality cannot be seriously questioned, especially evident in the interpretation of the results and the derivation of concrete consequences: “From the results, it can be concluded that there is a power disparity between the perpetrators and the individuals involved, leading to feelings of helplessness among the individuals, which may give rise to defense mechanisms and dissociative symptoms to psychologically cope with such extreme experiences of violence” (Schröder et al., 2020, p. 257). Furthermore, the research group suggests, “In addition to the induction of DIS, programming of dissociative elements, gaslighting and ideological indoctrination, the present results suggest that perpetrators exploit children’s basic needs in a power gap to secure their sense of belonging to the group of perpetrators. The possibility that perpetrators controlling certain parts of the personality of the persons concerned presents a challenge, for the individuals themselves, but also for support professionals in psychosocial care ... and the justice ... To meet these challenges, professional information and contact points for sheltered exit assistance ... are needed” (Schröder et al., 2020, p. 257f). The possibility that perpetrators control specific personality states of the individuals involved is suggested. Readers *must* infer from this that it is a *real phenomenon*. The mention of the need for protected escort from structures of ORA only makes sense if one assumes a genuine phenomenon. The final report goes on to state, “The results of this study suggest that there are mutually influencing conditions that make it

difficult to detect ORAs' (Schröder et al., 2021, p. 11). However, a problem of lack of detection can only exist in relation to a real phenomenon.

Contrary to the claims made by Schröder et al. (2023), it is evident that the study's own results are consistently interpreted as factual information. For instance, the study states, "There was a correlation between one's own family's involvement in ORA structures and ideological perpetrator strategies, suggesting that family members play a greater role in organized structural groups than in organized perpetrator groups" (Schröder et al., 2021, p. 18).

The assumption of relevance to reality is further underscored by quotes from interviewed psychosocial professionals, of whom 85% reported encountering "victims whose personality had been deliberately split by the perpetrators... Additionally, the victims' experiences of violence often persisted... since only a part of them had succeeded in escaping" (Schröder et al., 2021, p. 21f.). The fact that subjectively affected individuals and professionals provide similar information in the studies leads to the conclusion that "the strong agreement in the information regarding ideologies and forms of violence between the interviewed samples can be seen as an indication of the plausibility of the reports" (Schröder et al., 2021, p. 26). So, once again, they imply that this is a real phenomenon.

3) Restriction to healthcare

Schröder et al. (2023) suggest that they restrict themselves to healthcare. However, their own publications refute this claim, as they advocate for extensive legal consequences. For instance, they state, "Due to criminal law obstacles from the perspective of persons affected by ORA, the prosecution of violent acts often fails in the already few reported cases, which can make it more difficult to uncover ORA structures. In addition to deterrently burdensome assessment processes, it is difficult for those affected by the perpetrators to produce sufficient evidence of the crime due to concealment strategies... In addition, persons with trauma sequelae often failed to meet the criteria of credibility assessment, which is common in Germany. They are not believed and they are powerless. Therefore, this procedure should be reviewed and adapted for use in such special assessment circumstances" (Schröder et al., 2020, p. 257f.).

The alleged limitation to healthcare in this context is not only misleading but also presupposes the assumption of a real phenomenon. However, if, as recently asserted by Schröder et al. (2023), one does not make this assumption, such claims not only appear pointless but are also ethically unjustifiable.

4) Protection of survivors

Schröder et al. (2023) argue with the ethical imperative of safeguarding those who have subjectively experienced the phenomenon. They state, "By not discussing the participants' reports as possible false memories in the publications, the research group aimed to protect those self-identified survivors who participated in developing the survey as well as those who would read the study results after participation" (Schröder et al., 2023).

It is uncommon for scientific publications not to reflect the current state of research, even if done in the name of protecting those subjectively concerned. Such an unusual practice would typically necessitate an explicit explanation at the outset of a scientific publication, which, in this case, has not been provided.

However, the research group goes beyond this in their publications. In fact, they explicitly contradict the established state of research and discredit researchers who hold differing views. For example, they note, "The so-called 'Question of Faith' has accompanied the topic of ORA for a long time ... and is expressed, among other things, in the fact that critics deny reports of experiences as (e.g. suggested by therapists) pseudo-memories" (Schröder et al., 2020, p. 250).

The research group's deliberate disregard of the current state of research appears to be a conviction-based decision.

5) Feasibility of credibility assessments

Another argument of Schröder et al.'s (2023) aligns with the direction taken by the previous arguments. It highlights that in clinical psychology, the question of external criteria (reality check) is generally avoided. They state, "In this regard, research in clinical psychology rarely engages in credibility assessments – because it is neither the research question nor feasible to do so."

This argument falls short for two reasons. First, there is no supporting evidence for the existence of mind control, targeted personality splitting, and induced amnesias. Even if it were neither possible nor reasonable to directly verify the subjective experiences of the individuals themselves, it would have been crucial, given this context, to explicitly address the reality of the collected data. This is especially important when the reported empirical results may be of questionable accuracy. For example, Nick et al. (2018) report an average onset age of 3 years for experiences of violence, implying that many affected individuals would have been 0 to 2 years old at the time. Such early memories are highly improbable in terms of psychology of memory (DGPs, 2023).

Secondly, the reality of patients does indeed matter in the clinical context. Even the guidelines of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSD, 2011) caution that in a therapeutic setting, clients should be granted the freedom to assess the truthfulness of their inner experiences themselves while adhering to psychotherapeutic principles, including neutrality. Failure to observe this principle could significantly increase the risk of developing false memories (Greuel, 2022). The Swiss Clinic Littenheid serves as a distressing example of what can occur when the possibility of questioning personal experiences is discarded, and misleading notions are unprofessionally reinforced. It was found that “the conspiracy narrative of ritual violence/mind control is present in the trauma therapy wards ... and that the methodology practiced in the trauma therapy wards is technically incorrect and likely exacerbates illness” (Lexperience, 2022, p. 5).

6) Conceptual misinterpretation

A final argument presented by Schröder et al. (2023) involves the denial of relying on questionable sources. They state, “Beyond that, citations in the research group’s articles of the book by Miller (2011) only refer, amongst other citations, to ‘mind control’ reports of clients and do not imply that the researchers evaluate this whole book’s contents as true... Further, ‘mind control’ only forms a category in the results section of Schröder et al. (2020), because this term was brought up by persons in the hearings by the Independent Inquiry that were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.” They also suggest replacing the term “mind control” with “psychological manipulation” (Schröder et al., 2023), stating, “However, with the knowledge of today, five years later, it might be more appropriate to use the term ‘psychological manipulation’ instead of ‘mind control’ to avoid possible misinterpretations.”

This argument is misleading in several respects. First, mind control was a central focus of the research group’s studies, and it did not first appear as a subcategory in the results section of a 2020 publication. The first published study specifically focused on mind control (Nick et al., 2018), which was also emphasized in the questionnaire’s instructions: “In the context of organized and/or ritual abuse, those affected report different forms of consciousness division and manipulation. They report that extreme use of violence in childhood and adolescence split their developing personality into different parts. The resulting personality parts were specifically trained and used for their purposes by the perpetrators. This form of control and exploitation is what we call mind control in this study.”

Secondly, contrary to what Schröder et al. (2023) claimed, the work of Miller (2014), which is central to the conspiracy narrative, is explicitly referred to in the final report as scientific specialist literature: “Psychotraumatology has so far hardly taken note of deliberately created forms of DIS by perpetrators, while the specialist literature on ORA provides very precise and differentiated descriptions of these characteristic parts of the personality (Miller 2014; Fliss 2013)” (Schröder et al., 2021, p. 14 see also Nick et al., 2019, p. 116). The second specialist literature referred to here by Schröder et al. (2021) also cites Fliß, who is presented in the report by Lexperience (2022) as a key player in the spread of conspiracy theories (Fliß, 2012).

Thirdly, “psychological manipulation” conveys a different meaning than what the research group defined as “mind control”. Instead of addressing the methodological problems of their own studies, they are now opting for terminology that downplays and distracts from these issues. In Switzerland, where public criticism has arisen, this strategy is also observed in clinical practice following criticism, as noted by Clinic Littenheid: “It was noticed that various interviewed employees attempted to conceptually trivialize the topic of ritual violence and mind control. Clear terms such as ‘programming’ were described as ‘conditioning through stimuli,’ and ‘mind control’ as ‘in the sense of confidentiality’” (Lexperience, 2022, p. 4). This downplaying argumentative strategy is now observable in Schröder et al. (2023).

Conclusion

In the legal realm, years of police and judicial investigations into alleged cases of ritual satanic abuse (including mind control, targeted personality splitting and induced amnesia) have been carried out without concrete evidence. In the therapeutic context, therapists, influenced by the disputed publications, contribute to the induction of false memories, grounded in false assumptions. The consequences can be as severe as the initial traumas experienced. This is exemplified by the Clinic Littenheid, which an external expert opinion found to employ disease-promoting methods. According to the expert opinion, the treatment approach at the clinic is shaped by the beliefs of a small minority of trauma therapists who operate largely in isolation from the psychological and psychiatric community. This group utilizes non-evidence-based methods based on the belief in the existence of satanic ritual sexual abuse in Switzerland. This belief leads them to treat long-forgotten and re-remembered traumatization as established facts (Lexperience, 2022, p. 5).

The research group led by Briken offers this uncontrolled minority, also active in Germany, a supposed scientific legitimacy through their publications. This heightens the risk that patients may be further entrenched in false memories, while therapists, through training and supervision, may become convinced of the existence of mind control and targeted personality splitting as probable causes of mental illness. Particularly grave consequences may ensue if the dissemination of misleading assumptions, characterized by Schröder et al. (2020, p. 250) as “educational outreach,” fosters therapist eagerness to uncover previously unremembered abuse. The case of Littenheid demonstrates that this issue is not isolated; an independent expert discovered evidence of conspiracy narratives in more than half of the 422 medical records examined. In over one-tenth of these cases (43), the issues were very serious (Martin & Marolf, 2023).

Recent studies by Sonnicksen (2023) have further shown significant interference in treatment for patients. Rediscovering previously unremembered abuse in most patients resulted in a worsening of their health during treatment and severed their ties with family members. In light of potentially serious treatment errors, advocates for victim protection should exercise caution. The Legal Psychology Section of the German Psychological Society (2023) and the BDP (2023) have also taken a stance on this issue, advocating for a stronger scientific foundation for initiatives in federal ministries aimed at safeguarding victims of sexual abuse.

The response from Schröder, Nick, Andresen, Gahleitner, Kavemann, Richter-Appelt, and Briken (2023) indicates their unwillingness to accept responsibility for their chosen method, which is scientifically problematic, and for their conclusions, which are unsustainable based on the current state of research. As elucidated in detail in our original paper by Niehaus and Krause (2023), responsible behavior in such a sensitive application context is not only scientifically expected but is also ethically imperative in protecting an exceptionally vulnerable group of individuals.

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