

Media and Moral Panics

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OVERVIEW

Chapter 3 provides:

- An overview of the well-known but often misinterpreted and misrepresented concept of 'moral panics'.
- An analysis of the pros and cons of the moral panic model as a conceptual tool for understanding public responses to mediated crime and deviance.
- An examination of the five defining features that identify moral panics, as they have traditionally been conceived.
- A discussion of 'deviancy amplification' and the extent to which attempts by authorities to control deviant behaviour actually lead to its increase.
- Brief exploration of the status of paedophilia as a moral panic.

KEY TERMS

- consensus
- demonization
- deviance
- deviancy amplification spiral
- folk devils
- labelling
- mega-cases
- moral panic
- risk
- signal crime
- social reaction
- stigmatizing
- subculture
- youth

'Moral panic' is a familiar term in academic studies of crime, *deviance* and the media. It refers to public and political reactions to minority or marginalized individuals and groups who appear to be some kind of threat to consensual values and interests. The media – usually led by the press – will define a group or act as 'deviant' and focus on it to the exclusion of almost everything else. The concept of *moral panic* originated in British sociology in the 1970s with the publication of Stanley Cohen's (1972/2002) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Although not the first scholar to explore the role of the mass media in *labelling* non-conformist groups and manufacturing crime waves (that was Jock Young in 1971), Cohen has been credited as providing the first *systematic* empirical study of the media amplification of deviancy and subsequent public responses. Since then, the concept of moral panics has been applied, developed, lauded and criticized in equal measure (Hall et al., 1978/2013; Waddington, 1986; Watney, 1987; Jenkins, 1992; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Thompson, 1998; Critcher, 2003). In fact, so enshrined is the notion that it is not only found in criminology textbooks, but has also entered the public consciousness and is regularly referred to within the popular media, who have uncritically

employed it to describe public reactions to numerous social phenomena from child abusers to flu epidemics and from asylum seekers to bankers.

Yet the field out of which the moral panic thesis emerged and was made famous – sociology – all but abandoned the term within 10 years of its inception and it usually warrants only the briefest of mentions in the best-selling textbooks in the discipline. Further, despite the fact that an understanding of moral panics relies on a working knowledge of the production practices of the media, few university degree courses in media studies pay more than a glancing acknowledgement of the media's alleged power to define and amplify deviance to the level where society experiences a sense of collective panic akin to a disaster mentality. By contrast, the concept was considered to still have sufficient currency within criminology to warrant special issues of *Crime, Media, Culture* in December 2011 and the *British Journal of Criminology* in January 2009. It has also spawned a number of related criminological concepts, including *signal crimes* which posits that media coverage engenders fear of crime, causing long-term modifications in people's behaviour (Innes, 2003, 2004), and *mega-cases* which notes that newspapers engage readers in stories by encouraging them to become 'mediated witnesses' and identify with victims of crime (Peelo, 2006).

This chapter aims to account for the divergences between different disciplines within the social sciences and to consider the pros and cons of the moral panic thesis as a conceptual tool for criminologists. Certainly, in its early formation, the concept of moral panic lent itself to amalgamation with American criminology, which was highly influential in the UK. It is relatively easy to comprehend how the conceptualization of moral panics by Stanley Cohen, Jock Young, Stuart Hall and others found intellectual and empirical compatibility with Lemert's (1951) study of social pathology, Becker's (1963) analysis of the labelling of 'outsiders', and Matza's (1964) study of delinquency and drift. Moreover, it is no coincidence that the emergence of a distinctive British school of subcultural theory accompanied a succession of youth subcultures in the UK, starting with the Teddy boys in the 1950s, followed by mods and rockers and hippies in the 1960s, and skinheads, punks and African-Caribbean groups such as rude boys and Rastafarians in the 1970s. Since that time, British criminologists have continued to test the validity of the moral panic model and it has recently enjoyed a particularly strong revival in relation to the media reporting of child abusers and paedophiles (Jenkins, 1992, 2001, 2009; Silverman and Wilson, 2002; Critcher, 2003; see also Chapter 4).

With this evolution in mind, this chapter considers the background and defining features of the moral panic model as it has traditionally been conceived. The discussion pays particularly close attention to moral panics directed at deviant youth; a theme which will be developed in the following chapter, which explores the confusion and paradoxes that surround contemporary attitudes to children.

2. The moral discourse is established by journalists and various other authorities, opinion leaders and moral entrepreneurs, who collectively demonize the perceived wrong-doers as a source of moral decline and social disintegration.
3. Moral panics clarify the moral boundaries of the society in which they occur, creating consensus and concern.
4. Moral panics occur during periods of rapid social change, and can be said to locate and crystallize wider social anxieties about risk.
5. It is usually young people who are targeted, as they are a metaphor for the future and their behaviour is regarded as a barometer with which to test the health or sickness of a society.

How the mass media turn the ordinary into the extraordinary

The mundanity and sheer 'ordinariness' of the events which gave rise to a moral panic in the seaside town of Clacton in 1964 are beautifully captured by Cohen:

Easter 1964 was worse than usual. It was cold and wet, and in fact Easter Sunday was the coldest for 80 years. The shopkeepers and stall owners were irritated by the lack of business and the young people had their own boredom and irritation fanned by rumours of café owners and barmen refusing to serve some of them. A few groups started scuffling on the pavements and throwing stones at each other. The Mods and Rockers factions – a division initially based on clothing and life styles, later rigidified, but at that time not fully established – started separating out. Those on bikes and scooters roared up and down, windows were broken, some beach huts were wrecked and one boy fired a starting pistol in the air. (1972/2002: 29)

Although Cohen admits that these two days were 'unpleasant, oppressive and sometimes frightening' (1972/2002: 29), the levels of actual intimidation, conflict and violence in Clacton (and in Brighton where similar incidents occurred

When it comes to political and social problems, Cohen's key findings was that, while the media frequently condemn their use of violence, they nonetheless accept that violence is a legitimate way for the police to deal with problems, and is sometimes a necessary form of retaliation. The media-constructed definitions of the situation are therefore reinforced and all sides behave as 'expected' (Cohen and Young, 1973).

The role of the authorities in the deviancy amplification process

It has been suggested that moral panics have their origins in moral crusades such as the American Prohibition Movement of 1900-20 and, before that, the European witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). The moral crusaders of contemporary society are journalists, newspaper editors, politicians, the police and pressure groups, who combine to set in motion a spiral of events in which the attention given to the deviants leads to their criminalization and marginalization. One version of the moral panic model thus suggests that it is those with vested interests who use the media as a conduit to make a moral statement about a particular individual, group or behaviour (although question of source is by no means straightforward or universally

agreed upon, as we shall see shortly). It is argued that those in power label minority groups as subversive with a view to exploiting public fears, and then step in to provide a 'popular' solution to the problem which, in the current rhetoric of populist punitiveness, usually amounts to getting tougher on crime. But not only does increased attention appear to validate the media's initial concern, it may also result in the target group feeling increasingly alienated, particularly when – as often happens – politicians and other 'opinion leaders' enter the fray, demanding tougher action to control and punish the 'deviants' and warning of the possible dangers to society if their activities are not held in check. Such widespread condemnation may lead the group to feel more persecuted and marginalized, resulting in an increase in their deviant activity, so that they appear to become more like the creatures originally created by the media. The continuing deviancy results in greater police attention, more arrests and further media coverage. Thus a '*deviancy amplification spiral*' (Wilkins, 1964) is set in motion (see Figure 3.1). Although a conservative analysis would posit that the spiral demonstrates the media's justification in responding to public interest and rising crime, a more radical account would argue that the hysteria

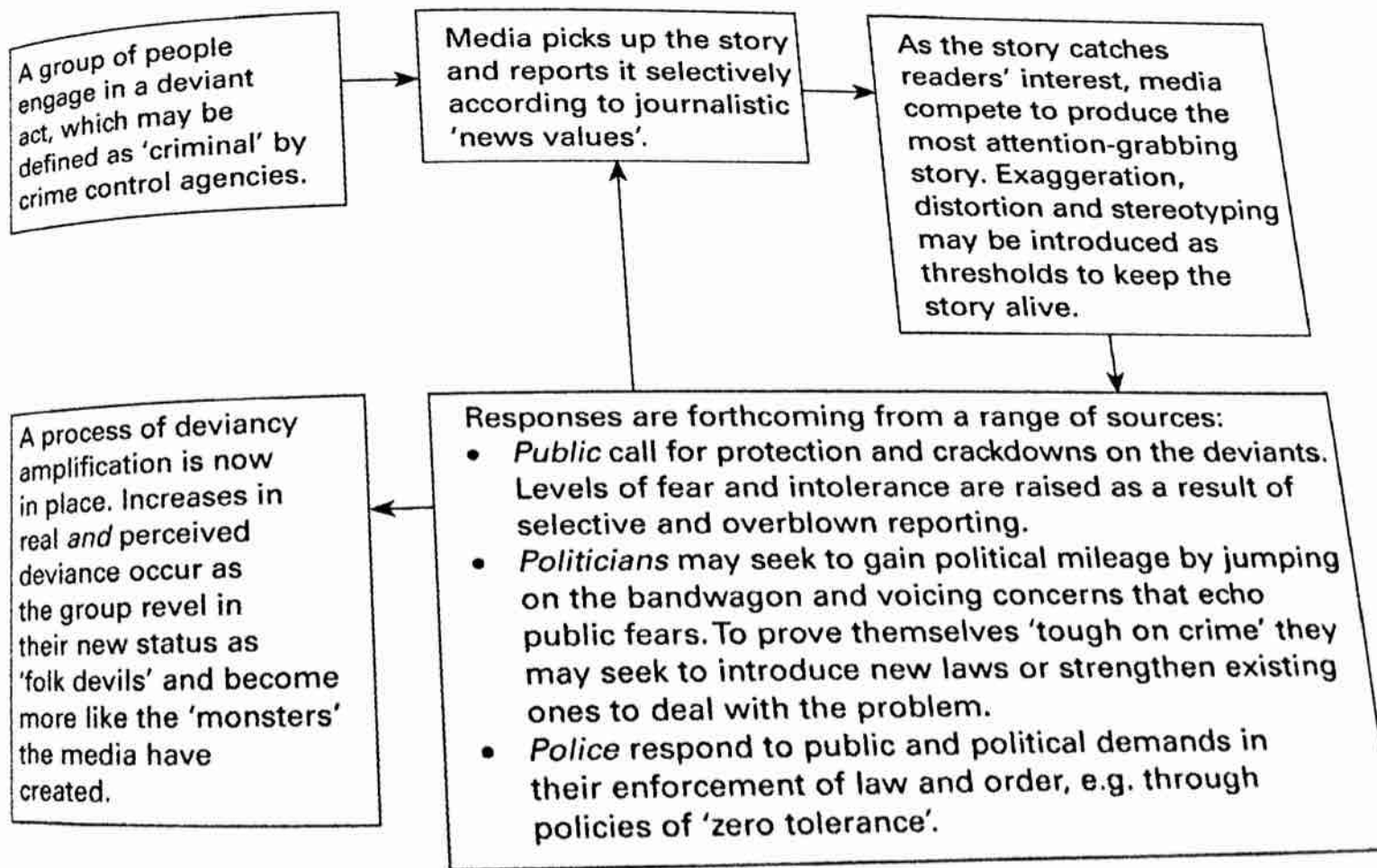


Figure 3.1 Deviancy amplification spiral: the reporting of deviance within a framework of exaggeration, distortion, prediction and symbolization sets into motion a series of interrelated responses

Defining moral boundaries and creating consensus

In the identification of a group responsible for a perceived threat, a division quickly becomes apparent between 'us' - decent, respectable and moral - and 'them' - deviant, undesirable outsiders. The perception that the threat is real, serious and caused by an identifiable minority does not have to constitute a universal belief, or even be held by a majority, but the national press will report it in such a way as to imply that their condemnation of the threatening behaviour represents a *consensus*. In addressing an imagined national community, newspapers will frequently appeal to a nostalgic conservative ideology, a desire for retribution, and to a much vaunted opinion that 'common sense' should prevail. What these three combined factors amount to is a popular ideological perception that 'things aren't what they used to be'. In an echo of mass society theory a century ago (see Chapter 1), many have argued that society is rapidly and inexorably deteriorating due to a decline in religious morality, a growing lack of respect for authority, the disintegration of the traditional nuclear family, the media as provider of role models for the nation's children and - in very recent years - the existence of perverts who prey on our children via the Internet. Moreover, there is a widespread acceptance among politicians and the media that the appropriate response to this sorry state of affairs is to call for tougher action on the part of the police, the courts and the prisons. Take this letter written in the 1950s by a 'family doctor':

Teddy boys ... are all of unsound mind in the sense that they are all suffering from a form of psychosis. Apart from the birch or the rope, depending on the gravity of their crimes, what they need is rehabilitation in a psychopathic institution. (Brake, 1980: 11)

tions and the destruction of a state of economic crisis, yet by the late 1950s a new spirit of optimism emerged and the 1960s became a time of full employment. New social patterns were also radically altering the face of Britain: family relationships changed as legislation was introduced to make divorce easier and more socially acceptable for women; new technologies and the emergence of the service and leisure industries were challenging traditional industrial practices, with semi-professional and professional jobs being created at roughly the same pace as the number of manual workers declined; and migration of British citizens from New Commonwealth countries was taking place. All these factors combined to make many people feel very uncertain and anxious about their lives, and concerns about change, instability and the displacement of what went before became consolidated in the group identities of the new youth subcultures.

Youth

The social construction of *youth* as a problem that had bubbled just beneath the surface of British social and political life for many years exploded into the public consciousness in the late 1950s and almost immediately became the subject of sociological enquiry. It is often said that 'youth' came into its own in the post-war era. Before the Second World War, young people tended to model themselves on their parents and their clothes, manners, aspirations and expectations were all

characteristic of a previous era. But in the 1950s, young people became seen as a specific social category, distinct from other age groups, and the word 'teenager' was coined for the first time. They rejected their parents' values and interests, and became powerful citizens and consumers in their own right. Traditional class boundaries were also broken down as the media and leisure industries homogenized teenagers into a vibrant, consumer group. Cafés, milk bars and dance halls sprang up, and a range of cultural products were explicitly aimed at a young audience. Hollywood film stars such as Marlon Brando and James Dean, rock-and-roll artists like Buddy Holly and Elvis, pirate radio stations such as Caroline and Luxembourg, and television programmes including *Ready, Steady, Go* and *Juke Box Jury* all heightened the sense of excitement and freedom that was associated with being a teenager in the 1950s and 1960s. Teenagers were more affluent than they had ever been before, and formed a larger section of society than other age groups because of the post-War 'baby boom' years. They had significant purchasing power, and they represented vitality and social mobility to a degree which marked them out from other generations. More than at any time previously youth represented the future and became a powerful metaphor for 'New Britain' in all its vibrant, urban modernity.

However, the combination of rapid social change with distinctive, unconventional and often spectacular styles of physical appearance and behaviour was a heady mixture. If 'youth' represents the future, a future in the hands of these unconventional and unpredictable young people who seemed to be actively resisting authority and rejecting everything that was traditional or conventional, was simply too frightening for many to contemplate. For all the unfettered fun attached to being a teenager in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was a darker edge; a flipside to the apparently positive traits of youth. Modern life, the expansion of cities, and increased opportunities for leisure were the focus of growing disquiet. Young people represented vitality and social mobility to a degree which marked them out from previous generations, but 'modern' equated to 'brash', being cosmopolitan and classless were inextricably linked to having too much wealth and too little morality, and the homogeneity brought to young people by the growth in consumer industries aimed specifically at them made them thoughtless and selfish in the eyes of many older people. Cohen suggests that this first generation of teenagers symbolized the confused and paradoxical feelings that many held in this period of rapid social transformation:

They touched the delicate and ambivalent nerves through which post-War social change in Britain was experienced. No one wanted deprivation or austerity, but messages about 'never having it so good' were everywhere. That some people were having it too good for them was a new experience.

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to experiment, but were simultaneously the conduits of all the fears in society about change and the unknown. At one and the same time they represented all that was new, shiny and modern, and everything that was transitory, disposable and tacky.

Problems with the moral panic model

The concept of 'moral panics' has been widely criticized for its perceived limitations, yet it is a theory that just refuses to go away. A fundamental difficulty with moral panics is not the concept itself, but the way that it has been embraced by the generations of writers, researchers, journalists and students since its inception in 1971, many of which have created the impression of an outdated model that has outlived its usefulness. There are two common, flawed approaches. One is the failure to go beyond a faithful re-write of the original text and a fawning, unreflective adherence to its theoretical premises. The other is a tendency to overextend the concept of moral panics, stretching it so much that it becomes a catch-all term which encapsulates any public cause for concern from economic crisis to immigration, but tells us nothing meaningful about the interrelationship between the media, social problems, social policy and public opinion in the contemporary world (Hughes et al., 2011). As Kidd-Hewitt and Osborne (1995) point out, media-criminology has become fixed within a pattern of enquiry which frequently relies on 'ritualistic reproductions' or misrepresentations of Cohen's original conceptualization of the term, and *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* left 'such significant and substantial foundation stones that they are constantly mistaken for the final edifice, instead of notable developments to be built upon' (Kidd-Hewitt and Osborne, 1995: 2). So what are the shortcomings of the moral panic thesis? Several points of possible ambiguity or contention have already been discussed and it should already be clear that some aspects of the moral panic model are open to several different interpretations. But there remain some fundamental flaws in the idea of moral panics that have yet to be satisfactorily addressed, and it is to these that we now turn.

A problem with 'deviance'

The deviancy amplification spiral is problematic on a number of counts. First, not all folk devils can be said to be vulnerable or *unfairly* maligned (paedophiles provide one such example; the bankers responsible for the recent economic crisis are arguably another), and the accelerating loss of credibility

violence, or by reference to any sporadic incidents of conflict that occur. As Hall says, 'the tendency is ... to deal with any problem, first by simplifying its causes, second by *stigmatizing* those involved, third by whipping up public feeling and fourth by stamping hard on it from above' (Hall, 1978: 34). This comment is made about football hooliganism, but could equally be said about any other moral panic, from spectacular youth subcultures to the problem of paedophiles.

A problem with 'morality'

A related difficulty with definition is that the 'moral' element in moral panics has either been accepted unproblematically, or otherwise glossed over with little concern for a particular episode's place within a wider structure of morality and in relation to changing forms of moral regulation (Thompson, 1998). In the following chapter we will consider 'morality' as it pertains to the sexualization of children and the age at which young people become sexually active. In brief, we might consider it somewhat hypocritical of society to impose legal sanctions on 'underage' sex (which in the Sexual Offences Bill criminalizes 15-year-olds for all forms of sexual conduct), while at the same time tolerating the overt sexualization of much younger children in other cultural realms – fashion, music, advertising and so on (Jewkes, 2010a). The age of consent was set at 16 in an attempt to thwart the use of children as prostitutes in Victorian England. Prior to 1875, it had been 12. However, in the wake of several cases where 13-15-year-old girls have run away from home with their boyfriends, the debate about the age at which young people become sexually mature has been reignited. It is, however, a debate that is likely to become hijacked by moral crusaders if prior experience is an indicator (a campaign in the 1980s led by Victoria Gillick to stop doctors prescribing contraception to under-16s has been held partially responsible for a simultaneous rise in teenage pregnancies) and it may prove impossible to discuss reasonably and rationally in a culture in which romanticized images of childhood as a time of winsome innocence prevail over a reality that includes child abuse, neglect, exploitation and the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Europe.

Jock Young (1971, 1974) highlights a further aspect of the ambiguity inherent in definitions of morality, suggesting that many of the people who think of themselves as 'moral' and take exception to the *immorality* of deviants, actually have a grudging admiration – envy, even – for those who are seen to be 'breaking the rules'. According to Young (1971), if a person lives by a strict code of conduct which forbids certain pleasures and involves the deferring of gratification in certain areas, it is hardly surprising that they will react strongly against those whom they see to be taking 'short cuts'. For Young, this ambivalence is partial explanation of the vigorous repression against what might be

and - in the new moral climate of age. But in many instances, moral panics appear to contain little or no moral element at all and the term has become a shorthand description for any widespread concern including, most prominently in recent years, health scares, especially those linking health problems to food and diet.

Problems with 'youth' and 'style'

In much of the moral panic literature, there is a presupposed assumption that the youth groups or other deviants involved are inevitably economically marginalized and turn to crime and deviance as an anomic means of combating the boredom and financial hardship associated with being out of work. Certainly, Cohen suggests that the mods and rockers were driven to violence as a result of feeling marginalized from the mass consumer culture directed at young people in the early 1960s. Yet an alternative reading might argue that the mods and rockers were the products of rising affluence and optimism, and far from being peripheral to the economic health of the country, they were largely responsible for making the 1960s swing! Since that time youth fashions and subcultural affiliations have spawned multi-million pound industries, and today's young people have on offer a vast range of concurrent subcultures which may in some cases present the solutions to their subjective socio-economic problems, but actually in most cases do little more than provide a temporary sense of 'belonging', a statement of being independent of the parent culture and a form of conspicuous consumption.

Group identity is thus at least as likely to be a statement of style and status as it is to be an act of resistance through ritual. All youth cultures require a relatively high level of financial input, whether they are based on music, fashion, football or some other 'fanship', and as Cohen remarks in his introduction to the revised second edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, the delinquent quickly changed from 'frustrated social climber' to 'cultural innovator and critic' (Cohen, 1980: iv). Even the punks of the 1970s, who are frequently characterized as a product of dole-queue despondency (Hebdige, 1979), were by no means all out of work and lacking economic means. Commitment to the punk movement was based on political disaffection, rebellion against the parent culture, enjoyment of the music, resistance to conventional codes of dress and many other varied factors. But it was orchestrated by a music producer (Malcolm McLaren) and a fashion designer (Vivienne Westwood) and was essentially a commercial enterprise. Entry into any youth subculture represents a part of the normal transition from childhood to adulthood that most young people in Western society pass through. But there are few youth cultures and styles which are not manufactured by or

level responses have declined

A problem with 'risk'

Another weakness with the moral panic model is that the overstated reaction to youth cultures on the part of the 'moral majority' is precipitated by a creeping sense of disorientation and bewilderment at the pace of change in modern life. This argument may underpin many parents' fears about their children's exposure to new and alternative media, including violent computer games and the Internet. But modernity has been a long project. Was there ever a generation which did not feel poised at the edge of something bigger, more exciting and - for some - potentially more frightening? Furedi (1997) has argued that we inhabit a 'culture of fear' in which loss of optimism and a belief in our capacity to change the world for the better has given way to a crippling sense of vulnerability. In a similar vein Carrabine asserts that 'few now dispute that we are living in times of high anxiety and that the mass media provide us with a daily diet of disasters from near and afar to continually remind us that we inhabit a world of crisis, danger and uncertainty' (2008: 162). But while 'high anxiety' might be the goal of the media, in everyday practice it is ontologically unsustainable and it seems overstated to characterize the current epoch as a universal, endlessly cyclical state of 'panickyness' (Sparks, 1992: 65). Indeed, Farrall and Gadd note that, 'few people fear crime frequently'; their research found that fewer than one in ten people (8 per cent) frequently experienced high levels of fear (2004: 127; see Chapter 6). Further, the inference in much writing on the subject that communities in our parents' and grandparents' day were tight-knit, self-policing and prone to spontaneous organization of street parties, while today's media-addicted neighbours are frightened, atomized and unknown to one another, is unproven and untenable. In the second, revised edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen himself surmizes that the level and intensity of media activity is sometimes exaggerated by researchers and writers in order to 'fit' their particular illustration of the moral panic thesis at work, and that the material selected as 'proof' of the slide into crisis (newspaper editorials, in the main) does not amount to such monumental proportions (Cohen, 1980).

A problem of 'source'

Although the panics over Teddy boys in the 1950s and mods and rockers in the 1960s meet the criteria of the moral panic thesis in terms of being discrete, transitory incidents that appear to have emerged suddenly and explosively and disappeared equally abruptly some time later, it has been left to later writers (Watney, 1987; McRobbie and Thornton, 1995) to point out that concerns about deviance are much more diffuse than is suggested in many accounts of panic. In other words, the disparate concerns over drugs, sexual permissiveness or perversion, liberal attitudes to marriage, the political re-emergence of the far right, and youth violence, are among the frequently conflicting issues which arise from a number of different sources and are dispersed throughout society. Meanwhile, specific moral panics such as the periodic scares about street crime involving black youth (mugging in the 1970s; the inner-city riots of the 1980s; gang-related knife and gun crime in the 1990s and 2000s) represent a generalized climate of hostility to marginal groups and 'unconventional' or untraditional norms. Far from happening out of the blue, as is sometimes suggested, moral panics may be viewed accordingly as part of the longer-term ideological struggles which are waged right across society and within all fields of public representation (Watney, 1987). As such, the initial targeting of deviants and the structured responses to them may be regarded as an integral part of the hegemonic function of the media, telling us far more about the nature of the media and their complex relationship with other social institutions than they do simply about the concerns of those in power. For example, a series of 'mega-cases' (Peelo, 2006) which occurred in the first decade of the 21st century not only served to elevate the perceived deviance of a whole category of individuals – young, black men who were on parole – but also inferred that these offences were symptomatic of a wider problem of moral decline and decrepitude in a society in which the professionals charged with protecting the public could no longer be trusted to do so. The opprobrium heaped on the Probation Service at this time was reminiscent of the scorn and criticism that the media have periodically directed at social workers over the last few decades (Jewkes, 2008).

The question of source also problematizes the idea that moral panics are the means by which elite interests become filtered down through society so that they appear to be to everyone's advantage. The term 'moral panic' implies that public reaction is unjustified and, in critical criminological accounts (e.g. Hall et al., 1978/2013), there is a suggestion that moral panics are essentially smokescreens put up by governments to cynically manipulate the media and public agendas. Some critics hang on to the belief that moral panics originate at a macro level and are engineered by a political and cultural elite as a deliberate and conscious effort to generate concern or fear which is actually misplaced. Others maintain that they originate at a more micro level with the

over cinema group leaders, academics, and themselves by jumping on a populist bandwagon. A fourth view of the source of moral panics, and a variation on the meso-level explanation, is that it is journalists themselves who are primarily responsible for generating moral panics simply as a way of increasing circulation or entertaining their audience (Young, 1974). Despite the fact that we can no longer talk of the 'mass' media in quite the same monolithic sense as we once did, campaigns such as the *News of the World's* 'naming and shaming' crusade to publicly identify paedophiles living in the community (a campaign originally started by a local paper, the *Bournemouth Echo*) might be said to be a powerful means of gaining readers and satisfying the demands of the market, while paying scant regard for the political consequences of such action (Aldridge, 2003).

A problem with 'audience'

The overriding problem with traditional characterizations of the moral panic model is that they presuppose that in finding *consensus* on certain issues, audiences are gullible and that they privilege mediated knowledge over direct experience; an assumption that is clearly not viable. In fact, more than any other factor, recent cultural and media theorists have resisted the moral panic thesis' implicit supposition that the public are naively trusting of media reports and cannot tell when they are being manipulated. In contrast to this assumption, research concerning the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda (that is, what the public take from the media and think about or discuss among themselves) stresses that there are many examples of public indifference or resistance to issues that constitute political and/or media crusades. Indeed, studies of advertising demonstrate that the least successful advertising campaigns are those commissioned by social agencies with the intention of changing people's behaviour - for example, anti-drugs campaigns and 'safe sex' messages - while the failure of the general public to take notice of issues which are deemed important by figures in power is evident in the falling numbers of couples in the UK who are marrying, despite the continuing efforts of political and church leaders. Furthermore, both the 1992 American

The longevity and legacy of the moral panic model: some concluding thoughts

Many of the criticisms levelled at moral panics in this chapter have been confronted by Cohen himself in the Introduction to the third edition of his famous book (1972/2002). Published to celebrate the 30th anniversary of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen addresses some of the problems associated with the concept he popularized (notably, the problems of proportionality, volatility and the value-laden aspect of the term). He also analyses several 'boundary marking' cases (James Bulger, Stephen Lawrence, Leah Betts, the Columbine High School massacre) and considers the extent to which they can be construed as 'successful' moral panics (1972/2002: ix ff.).

As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, it is difficult to explain why criminology – and its related fields – continue to place the moral panic thesis at the heart of studies of deviance and disorder when both sociology and media studies have more or less ignored it for decades. Why the latter subject areas have neglected it for so long is perhaps easier to comprehend. British sociology moved from considerations of structural changes and class-based divisions in the 1970s to the rise of New Right economic policies and ideology in the 1980s. The moral panic thesis seemed less relevant because it appeared to focus on sporadic and discrete episodes making a sudden and dramatic impact, rather than the underlying political-economic trends and their relationship to discourse and ideology; a dilemma already apparent in Hall et al.'s (1978) study of the moral panic over mugging. Media studies, on the other hand, which had whole-heartedly embraced sociological concerns in the 1960s and 1970s had taken a cultural turn by the 1980s. New enquiries in the field emphasized the audience as active makers of meaning or postmodern critics who were well qualified to see through the ideological veils put up by journalists and reporters.

The moral panic thesis was thus regarded by the new vanguard as reactionary, paternalistic and media-centric and the fact that, to a large extent it has been the mediated version of deviance and not the phenomenon itself which has been the focus of attention, is highly problematic for many media researchers. It is for these kinds of reasons that McRobbie and Thornton (1995) have urged us to 'rethink' moral panics in the context of a proliferating and fragmenting media. Following Watney's (1987) study of media responses to HIV and AIDS, they call for a more sophisticated understanding of human motivations for marginalizing certain groups. Certainly, the genuine, deep-seated anxieties at the root of reaction, and the 'outsiders' onto whom these anxieties are displaced, have become secondary concerns amidst all the rhetoric about the persuasive powers of the media. Meanwhile, 'fear of crime' has become a phrase that is widely banded about but seldom fully explained or understood.

of course, a passionately sustained mass public outrage (cf. Sparks, 1992). Furthermore, strong reaction to the emotiveness that frames moral panic may account for the amount of criminology students' research carried out on them, and the fact that, in my years as editor of the journal *Crime, Media, Culture*, articles submitted on some or other aspect of moral panic far outstripped those on any other subject. As Cohen himself says, studying moral panics is 'easy and a lot of fun' (Cohen, 1972/2002: xxxv). But implicit in his reflections 30 years on is the caveat that a faithful adherence to the original moral panic thesis may make it impossible to arrive at a balanced and reasonable estimation of the real role of media in people's lives and the true impact of crime on society.

Summary

- Chapter 3 has interrogated the much used but frequently misinterpreted concept of moral panics made famous by Stanley Cohen in 1972. It has discussed both strengths and weaknesses of the term and briefly considered why 'moral panics' are at the heart of much criminological debate about political struggles and cultural reproduction yet, simultaneously, barely feature in contemporary sociology and media studies texts on the subject.
- The discussion has centred on the five defining features of moral panics: the presentation of the ordinary as extraordinary; the amplifying role of authorities; definitions of morality; notions of risk associated with social change; and the salience of youth.
- The chapter has also examined the problems that these five features raise in the context of 40 years of adaptation, adoption, expansion and criticism, some of which has come from Cohen himself (1972/2002: vii ff.).
- We have considered the validity of the model in relation to paedophilia and reflected on whether it constitutes the moral panic of our age or a potential panic that never got off the ground.
- While it has been recognized that there are some fundamental flaws in the way that the term 'moral panic' has been uncritically applied to issues ranging from asylum seekers to dangerous dogs, and from health scares to the music of Marilyn Manson, it has not been suggested that the idea is invalid or unhelpful in conceptualizing social reactions to both immediate, short-term crises and to long-term general reflections on the 'state-of-our-times' (Cohen, 1972/2002: vii). As Cohen

(1972/2002: x-xi) points out, if we accept that moral panics may reflect genuine public anxieties rather than consisting only of media-generated froth, and that not all likely candidates for public outrage actually quite add up to a moral panic (Cohen highlights the example of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence), then we have a sound conceptual basis for examining the ways that morality and risk are perceived in postmodern society.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How convincing is the 'moral panic' thesis in explaining media reporting of, and public responses to, minority and/or deviant groups, in your view?
2. Moral panics have traditionally been directed at male, working-class subcultures and girls and women have been viewed as peripheral to the action. Can you think of any examples where girls or young women have been the recipients of moral outrage? How successful or otherwise has criminological theory been in offering explanations for female subcultural crime?
3. What recent examples of criminal or deviant behaviour can you think of which might be described as 'moral panics'? What is the primary source of the labelling of 'demons' in your chosen cases?
4. What kinds of crime are not the subjects of moral panics, and what effect on public perceptions of crime?

FURTHER READING