

Media Constructions of Children: 'Evil Monsters' and 'Tragic Victims'

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OVERVIEW

Chapter 4 provides:

- A discussion of the complex and frequently contradictory assumptions made about children in contemporary Britain.
- An analysis of public fears and anxieties surrounding childhood which reached a peak in 1993 with the murder of two-year-old James Bulger by two older children.
- A comparison of media representations of this crime, and other reported incidents that portrayed children as 'persistent offenders', 'evil monsters' and so on, with alternative media accounts representing children as vulnerable innocents who must be protected, not from other children, but from adults who seek to harm and exploit them.
- Evidence that suggests that children killed by strangers are much more likely to receive media attention than those who are killed by close relatives in the home.
- Support for the suggestion (which, in a somewhat crude formulation, underpins the moral panic thesis) that high-profile crimes involving child victims draw people together and mobilize their feelings of loss and guilt to produce a sense of 'imagined community'.

KEY TERMS

- | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| ■ adultification | ■ infantilization |
| ■ children | ■ moral majority |
| ■ constructionism | ■ paedophiles |
| ■ dangerousness | ■ risk |
| ■ doli incapax | ■ social construction |
| ■ evil monsters | ■ tragic victims |
| ■ imagined community | |

In the last chapter it was noted that some aspects of the behaviour of contemporary British youth which might once have been conceived as normal, natural and an inevitable part of growing up are increasingly becoming subject to moral censure and viewed as symptomatic of a fractured society. Yet, alongside the manufacture of fears about young people and crime, there has been a homogenization of age brackets into aspirational lifestyle categories which has resulted in a blurring of the distinctions between youth and adulthood. It might be argued, then, that the hostility once directed at an age group who were fundamentally different in appearance and aspirations to their parents' generation has, more recently, transmuted into something more confused. *Children* and adolescents

are still the subjects of moral panic and public outrage but, as we saw in our discussion of news values in Chapter 2, they are frequently also cast as *tragic victims*. In fact, never have society's attitudes towards young people been as polarized as they are currently. Alongside youth as folk devils, we now have children as *the victims of folk devils*. It is precisely this confusion that will be discussed in this chapter. First we will explore changing *social constructions* of childhood, before developing a more detailed critique concerning the paradoxical attitudes to children and young people that emerged in the mid-1990s. In 1993 children became regarded as *evil monsters* capable of committing the most depraved of acts, but by 1996 a counter-construction of children emerged; that of impressionable innocents who must be safeguarded, especially from the new number one demons - *paedophiles*.

1993 – Children as 'evil monsters'

Since the teenage rebellions of the 1950s and 1960s, the age at which young people may be designated folk devils has decreased, and since the early 1990s there have been regular reports about pre-teenage children committing increasingly serious offences ranging from burglary to rape. This trend has only served to reinforce the equivocal attitudes to youth noted by Cohen, to the extent where the precise boundaries of 'youth' and 'adolescence' are now unclear: no one seems to be sure exactly when childhood is left behind or when adulthood is achieved (Muncie, 2009). This problem is compounded by the fact that ideas about the onset of adolescence and the age at which children are deemed to understand the difference between right and wrong are not fixed, but are subject to contestation and change over time. Prior to the mid-19th century when positivism emerged to challenge it, ideas about crime and punishment were dominated by a theoretical perspective known as 'classicism'. A central feature of this approach was that punishment should fit the crime, not the individual offender. As a result, children were seen as equally culpable as adults when they committed an offence and were liable to the same penalties, including incarceration in prisons and prison hulks, and transportation to penal colonies. However, in Victorian society a new conception of childhood emerged out of the dominant cultural, medical and psychological discourses of the time. For the first time in modern history, childhood was thought of as a separate stage of development prior to the independence and responsibility that come with adulthood. Children were seen as requiring nurturing and protection through legislation; it was during this period that compulsory schooling started to be introduced, and laws were passed limiting the number of hours children could work and prohibiting them from working in certain industries.

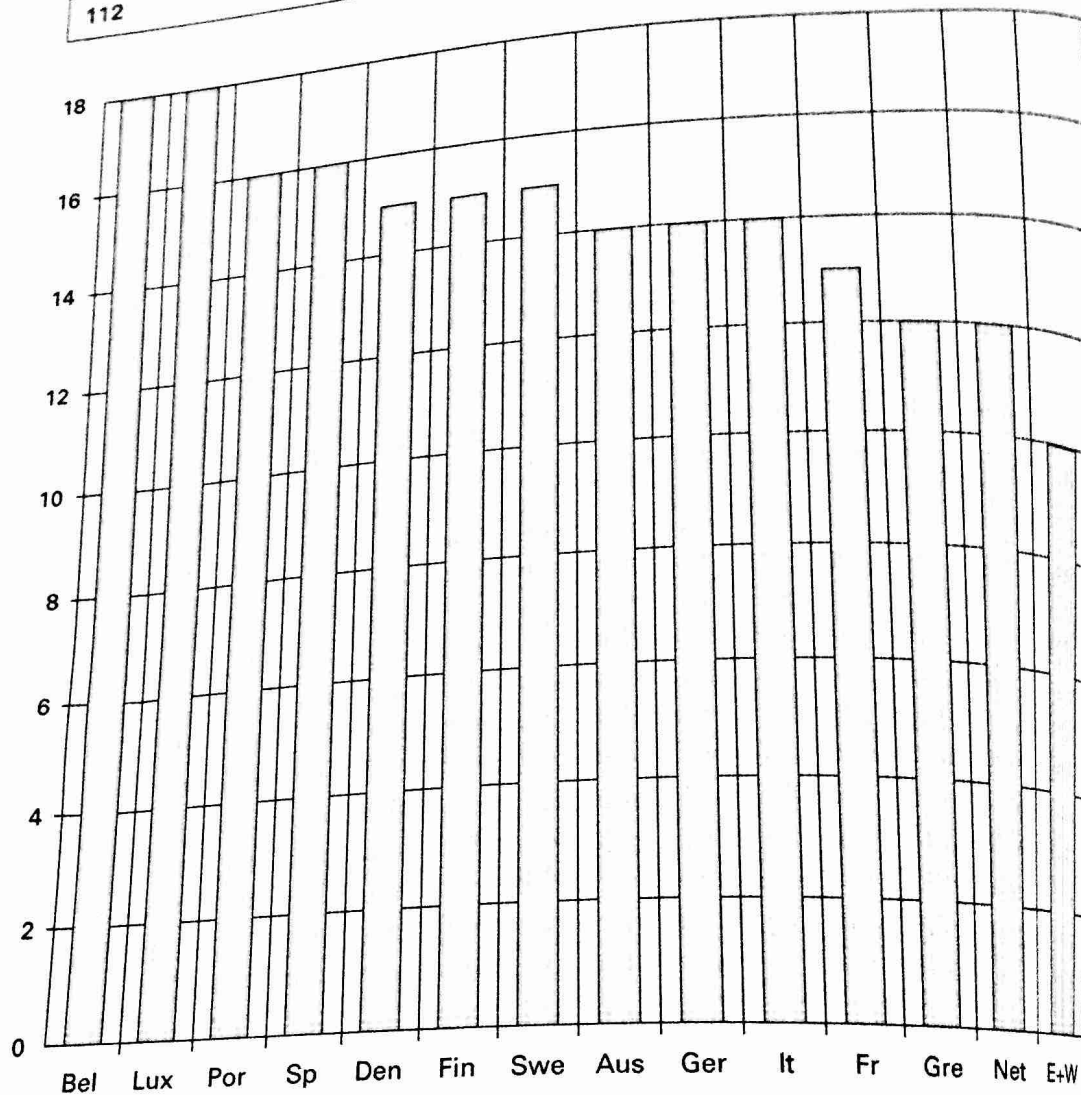


Figure 4.1 Ages of criminal responsibility in selected European countries

Source: Goldson, 2003

Since this time, messages about childhood have been somewhat mixed. For example, in contemporary Britain we have seen the emergence of the *adultified* child, with rises in teenage pregnancies, children being tried in adult courts, children winning the right to 'divorce' their parents and so on. England and Wales not only criminalize children at a much earlier age (see Figure 4.1), but also are by far the most inclined to lock them up. Staggeringly, in England and Wales twice as many children are incarcerated as in Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Austria, France and The Netherlands combined (Goldson, 2003). Yet, simultaneously, children are subjected to a greater degree of protective control and regulation which has led to a 'major reorganization

of the childhood... and from school... Furthermore... include a governing... a 300 per cent rise... country, has result... extended infant... their 20s or 30s. Within criminal... hood are exemplifi... court for the mur... Chapter 2, this cas... negative terms and... ous juvenile offend... case of Jon Venabl... emotive and troubl... youth', 'juvenile'... of Lombrosian inf... sponsibility and d... evil. The murder o... persistent young... watershed in the h... Above all, the co... graphically illustra... coexist with imag... victims and child... encapsulated this... while the characte... an ideal child ne... 10-year-old murde... and media discour... *adultification*. As others have... have been heard... the boys' 'family... their psycho-socio... Figure 4.1 shows... have been consid... court, and there... (Muncie, 1999). I... 14 can be held a... they knew they w... but they will - as

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been in England for a few months (she was born in
Coast 'for a better life') and she was black. But to further ensure
worthiness, she met her death at the hands of a close relative.

Their unwillingness to report the extent of child abuse and murder
the home is further evidence of the media's obsession with the random
risk and their overwhelming tendency to locate dangerousness exclusively
the public realm. The net result of this emphasis is that it is paedophiles -
including paedophiles who use the Internet to groom online and then commit
contact offences with children unrelated to them - who have come to be the
recipients of moral outrage in the 21st century. In a tragic postscript to the
Bulger case, a 27-year-old Jon Venables was recalled to prison in 2010 follow-
ing reports that he had committed offences relating to child pornography. The
Ministry of Justice refused to specify what the claims being made against him
were, but not only did his arrest permit the broadcast and print media to
replay and reanalyse the 1993 case all over again (with much the same hyste-
ria and prejudice that accompanied the original coverage), but the nature of
the allegations against him served to underline his characterization as an unre-
deemable and evil person incapable of being reintegrated.

1996 - Children as 'tragic victims'

So embedded is the notion that paedophilia is the most heinous crime of our
age that many commentators have suggested that it is the most significant

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moral panic of the last two decades (Jenkins, 1992, 2001; Silverman and Wilson, 2002; Critcher, 2003). Sex offences have always been newsworthy stories, but the term 'paedophile' first rose to prominence in 1996 when the theme of 'paedophiles in the community' swept across the UK, receiving extensive coverage in both regional and national media (Kitzinger, 1999). There were several catalysts for this sudden eruption of coverage. In the UK there had been a significant increase in public awareness of cases being exposed which involved child sexual abuse in residential child care homes and other institutions where children were supposed to be protected. In Northern Ireland several cases of Catholic priests accused of sexual offences against children made headlines and fuelled accusations of high-level cover-ups within the church (Greer, 2003). Anxiety escalated in the autumn of 1996 when a released paedophile was charged with a series of child murders in Belgium, and again there were accusations of a high-level cover-up, this time involving politicians, the police and civil servants. In the UK, the sexually motivated crimes of Fred and Rose West were uncovered, and 1996 was also the year in which 'Megan's Law' was created in the US following the rape and murder two years earlier of seven-year-old Megan Kanka by a twice-convicted sex offender who lived in the same street in New Jersey. These cases all tapped into existing concerns in the UK where disquiet was already being expressed at the relatively lenient sentences being handed down to some convicted paedophiles and their early release from prison. With the introduction of community notification legislation in America (dubbed 'Megan's Law'), lobbyists in this country were given a powerful new focal point for their campaigns. In response to public pressure and with a general election looming, the Sex Offenders Act was hurriedly introduced in 1997, followed a year later by the Crime and Disorder Act. These acts legislated for a national UK register of convicted or cautioned sex offenders to be held by the police, and for the police to be able to apply to the Magistrates' courts for a sex offender order to prohibit an individual from doing anything which might be deemed to put the public at risk.

In other words, sex offender orders are future-oriented; they require the police to predict an individual's likely future behaviour and make 'an assessment in respect of the present risk he [sic] presents' (Crime and Disorder Act, 1998). What is more, the usual civil liberties that would attend the treatment of suspected or past offenders are overridden in the case of sex offenders. In English law, those who have been convicted of a crime and have served a sentence then have their civil liberties restored but, in respect to sex offenders, the safety of the public is prioritized over the liberty of the individual (Ashenden, 2002). The individual does not have to have done anything to infringe the law in the present (or even to have a previous conviction for a sexual offence); he or she must simply give the police 'reasonable suspicion' that they might be a risk in the future (2002). For many commentators this is hugely problematic for

ters of individual responsibility or social responsibility, seeking to diffuse political responsibility.

The 'outing' and persecution of known paedophiles might therefore best be viewed as a meso-level concern. Kitzinger argues that neighbourhood pressure groups, disillusioned by the failure of authorities to prevent child abuse, were already taking direct action as early as the 1990s. These protest groups, consisting mostly of mothers who were outraged at official impotence and scared for their children's safety, provided the impetus for extensive media reports about paedophiles long before the 'watershed' case of Sarah Payne's abduction and murder. Jenkins' (1992) study of the moral panic over satanic child abuse also supports the 'meso' theory of source, albeit from a rather more cynical standpoint. He suggests that the 'exposure' by social workers of a vast and unsuspected prevalence of child abuse fulfilled a number of ideological and professional needs, including providing much needed extra funding for an under-resourced service, and much sought-after credibility - initially, at least - for a relatively low-status profession.

Guilt, collusion and voyeurism

The factors highlighted above reinforce the notion, proposed by left realists, that crime must be taken seriously and not regarded as mediated artifice, but there is another pertinent point to be made, and it is one that is rarely

discussed. By reducing serious crimes to moral panics, the media succeed in masking the collective sense of guilt that underpins traumatic events, while at the same time pandering to the voyeur in all of us. In the case of James Bulger a sense of shame and guilt extended beyond the immediate community (primarily the 'Liverpool 38' as the press dubbed them; the people who saw James being dragged to the railway line where he met his death, but who failed to intervene) and seeped into the conscience of the nation as a whole. Subsequent cases such as the abduction and murder of Sarah Payne and Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, have further shocked a society that effortlessly falls back on notions of 'evil within our midst' while denying its own flaws and colluding in the demonization of offenders as 'others'. In his analysis of the Bulger trial, Morrison (1997) candidly reminds us that most of us experienced events in our youth of which we are now embarrassed or ashamed; after all, children can be cruel, selfish and unconstrained. But at the same time as we recall, and recoil from, our own memories of ourselves as youths, we hang on to the ideal of children as precious innocents who must be protected from the sordid and the spoiled. No wonder that out of such incongruity, when children commit serious crimes, a deep and pervasive cultural unease is borne.

Our failure to protect youngsters from the 'perverts' and 'monsters' in our midst provokes a similar sense of collective anxiety and cultural unease. Yet, again, there are clear paradoxes in our cultural attitudes and legal responses to the sexualization and sexual victimization of young people. One legal anomaly is that the maximum sentence that can be imposed for unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of 13 is life, yet the maximum sentence for unlawful sex with a girl aged 13 or over is two years. The opportunity for paedophiles to exploit this legal distinction was brought home to the public in June 2003 when a paedophile was given a three-year sentence (subsequently raised to four-and-a-half years when the offender appealed against his sentence in October of that year) for unlawful sex with two girls aged 13. According to prosecutors, he had made contact with one of the girls via a chat room when she was 11 and had 'groomed' her for two years before abusing her shortly after her 13th birthday. Not only does it seem curious that the sexual abuse of a girl a few days before her 13th birthday can carry such a divergent sentence to that which can be imposed for the same crime a week later, but both seem incongruous in the context of an age of consent that is set at 16.

A further illustration of the anomalies that cause confusion over young people's sexuality is evident in the sustained, and frequently salacious, media reporting of teenage 'runaways'. In the aftermath of an intense period of anxiety surrounding the safety of young girls following the disappearances of Sarah Payne, Millie Dowler, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, the media spun out the panic through the summer of 2003 by reporting numerous incidents in

...was guaranteed by the... instances in which Fritzl sought to keep his... details of this... crimes private (he kept his victim in an underground chamber that had no... and its newsworthiness... natural daylight). Perhaps the fact that the crimes took place in Austria permit-... Fritzl in terms of his 'otherness' which, in turn, allowed them to pore over... every gruesome detail, including publishing photographs of the victim (taken... before she was kidnapped by her father and moved to the chamber beneath... the family home) and pictures and diagrams of the underground prison itself. Far less detail was published about a case in the UK which came to light in 2009 when a 56-year-old man was convicted of raping his two daughters who had 19 pregnancies between them. Legal restrictions prevented the media from naming any of the individuals involved, they had no visual images of the father or his daughters and the offender was simply referred to by all the newspapers as the 'British Josef Fritzl', once again underlining Fritzl's per- versely iconic status.

In summary, the fervent, voyeuristic media coverage devoted to cases such as those of Madeleine, James, Sarah, Holly and Jessica, gives them a superor- dinancy that lifts them above other, equally horrible, crimes. The decisions of those who work within media organizations to select certain stories and pre- sent them according to their professional codes and institutional news values can thus secure a powerful symbolic place in the public psyche, while at the same time repressing the collective sense of guilt and denial that such cases provoke. They are directed at events that have sufficient cultural resonance to threaten the fundamental basis of the social order. Yet, in constructing an indefensible, demonized 'other' against a backdrop of taken-for-granted nor- mality, moral panics over children who kill and are killed avoid any real risk to the essential structures of society. Those who look for alternative explana- tions are silenced or condemned as 'dogooders' seeking to make excuses for the worst examples of human depravity (Stokes, 2000). Not only does this close down further aetiological enquiry, but it also allows the community to remain emotionally and physically intact (cf. Barak, 1994b; Aldridge, 2003).

Moral panics and the revival of 'community': some concluding thoughts

In the previous chapter, we reviewed the concept of moral panics which has traditionally united politics, media and everyday life and in this chapter we have focused on the fear and loathing that is directed at two modern folk devils, offending children and paedophiles, both of whom have been characterized as the 'evil monsters in our midst'. In Chapter 3 it was suggested that the moral panic model is unhelpful and, certainly, it is problematic when applied to paedophilia because it suggests that genuine public fears about the sexual abuse and exploitation of children are unfounded or overstated. Quite simply, Cohen's thesis – or rather, its application by countless acolytes – is open to the criticisms that it reduces serious problems to overblown media reporting, distorts the reality of crime which usually involves victims and often entails human suffering, and can only account for public, spectacular crimes, not the serious offences that take place in private, hidden from the gaze of the media. The reduction of a widespread if largely hidden social problem to 'accessible proportions' (Cowburn and Dominelli, 2001: 403) arguably makes the issues reviewed in this chapter something *other than* or *beyond* moral panic, a term that diminishes incidents such as the murder or sexual abuse of a child to mere media-generated hysteria, negating the very real and rational responses that such crimes provoke (Kitzinger, 1999).

However, there are elements of the moral panic thesis that are interesting to explore further in this context, not least the emphasis it places on the notion of 'community'. As noted in Chapter 3, the tendency to fall back on notions of 'pure evil' are not that surprising; after all, once 'evil' has been defined, the public knows by implication what 'good' is. The labelling of paedophiles as 'enemies within' thus gives the hub of the group (often referred to euphemistically as the '*moral majority*') a sense of their own cultural identity. This is especially apparent in the actions taken by communities in response to the releasing of convicted paedophiles in their towns:

[I] enjoyed walking up the street with a gang of women, all shouting to get the paedophiles out. I can't help it but this is the noise, I got a...

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Summary

Confused attitudes to children

Part of the reason for the elasticity of 'youth' as a concept is that adult society holds contradictory and conflicting views regarding the nature of youth. Views of childhood are paradoxically captured in notions of 'innocence' and 'evil' and are frequently enshrined in law and upheld daily by the popular media. One example of constructions of childhood 'innocence' is encapsulated in the age at which individuals can legally consent to sexual intercourse. When it comes to sex, children are children until they reach 16. Yet, when it comes to youth justice, the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) abolished the presumption of *doli incapax* and structurally reconfigured youth justice in terms of moral understanding and culpability from the age of 10. The inconsistencies that lie at the heart of differing ages of criminal responsibility within the justice system is thus key to the confusing ideas surrounding childhood in contemporary Britain. Moreover, such paradoxes play into the hands of a media which constructs events in terms of binary oppositions and stock stereotypes. The media can position child offenders and victims of crime along a continuum from 'innocence' to 'evil', individualizing their pathology or vulnerability, in order that deeper questions about social structures – the family, education, political institutions and the media industries themselves – need never be asked.

Children as 'evil monsters'

The murder of James Bulger was a watershed in public perceptions of childhood, as well as in English law. As Scraton (2003) argues, James Bulger's death was exploited to the full, first by the Conservatives who, at their party conference in 1993, whipped up fervour with demands for execution, castration and flogging, and then by a New Labour government which rushed through its wide ranging Crime and Disorder Act, 1998 and

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set about appearing tougher on crime than its Conservative predecessors. And throughout it all, the figures of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, whose photographs were printed in every paper as soon as the guilty verdicts were reached, were a gift to a media which had squeezed every last drop out of stories about 'persistent young offenders' and the 'yob society', and were now given a new motif for evil with which to provoke respectable fears in the shape of two 10-year-old boys.

Children as 'tragic victims'

The media-orchestrated panic over sex offending focuses attention on the 'paedophile', a social construction which reinforces public fear of 'stranger-danger' and provides the community with an identifiable hate-figure on to whom they can project their anxiety and loathing. At the same time it has brought back to the fore notions of childhood innocence and vulnerability and emphasized the need to manage the threat posed by paedophiles via various 'risk assessment' strategies, while ignoring the reality of danger in the family and home. Mediated constructions of paedophiles and the public responses they shape thus not only present a partial image of the abuse and exploitation of children, but also let the community, in its broadest sense, 'off the hook' (Cowburn and Dominelli, 2001). The impression of random danger is perpetuated, but it is a risk that can be accommodated provided that it is contained within terms which emphasize community. Crimes involving young victims of older or adult offenders are therefore a primary vehicle for expressions of community 'togetherness', ranging from vigilance to vigilantism, and from public sorrow to public vengeance.

STUDY QUESTIONS

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