

# 2

## The Development of the Moral Panic Concept

This chapter explores the studies of Cohen (1972), Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts (1978) and Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) that were foundational to the development of the concept of moral panic. Together, they can be seen as one ‘original project’ of moral panic insofar as it is these studies that were first to apply and extend the concept of panic in relation to material cases. The objective of the chapter is to identify the common elements between each of their case studies as well as to view how the models they developed in relation to these cases were subject to the social, cultural and historical contexts from which they were drawn.

### Folk Devils and Moral Panics

In 1964, at Clacton, during a cold and miserable Easter, two adolescent groups known as the Mods and Rockers scuffled on and off over a period of two days. The media went about sensationally over-reporting the events of these incidents, the police increased their vigilance and overzealously employed crowd control tactics at Clacton and at other nearby beachside towns, and local people urged that the

authorities should 'do something' about vandalism and mob violence amidst rumours that vigilante squads were being formed by tradesmen seeking to protect their property. Editors articulated their opinions about what should be done about out-of-control youth, interest groups and members of parliament argued for increased disciplinary measures and stiffer sentences, and the courts imposed unusually severe sanctions upon arrestees in an effort to 'clamp down' upon the volatile disturbances that had come to appear to be happening ever more frequently.

For PhD student Stanley Cohen, this series of events demanded scholarly interpretation. The 'episode' would become the topic of his dissertation and later the subject of his influential text *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Informed by the 'transactional' or 'interactionist' approach to deviant behaviour (see Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951), his analysis developed in relation to an emphasis on the set of reactions to the Mods and Rockers: how were they identified, labelled and controlled? Why did the reaction take particular forms? What were the myths, stereotypes and methods of control that erupted from the interaction between the deviants and society?

Cohen (1972) observed that the information about the activities of the Mods and Rockers was mostly received via the media. As a result, much of his analysis is devoted to understanding the role of the media in the development of the episode. He was especially concerned to understand the ways by which the two groups were constructed into deviants, or *folk devils*, and to comprehend how the information in the media served to increase the deviant acts *as well as* the societal reaction to the acts. To assist in developing his understanding, he drew upon Wilkins' (1964) 'deviance amplification cycle' which describes how an initial act of deviance can set off a societal reaction, which in turn increases the deviance, followed by another increase in the reaction and so forth. Cohen (1972) illustrated how the media exaggerated the seriousness of what had occurred at Clacton by way of a number of practices that are characteristic of crime reporting. Sensational headlines and melodramatic language were employed to describe the events and those involved in them, for example. Phrases such as 'riot', 'battle' and 'screaming mob' created an image of a town under siege. Other

more subtle journalistic practices were also evident, such as the use of plurals to describe a single event and reporting the same event many times, which gave the impression that it had occurred more than once. Headlines were also frequently misleading. The term 'violence' would appear in headlines but the article attached to those headlines would report that *no* violence had occurred. Rumours were also reported as if they had some factual basis. What is more, the media suggested that the events at Clacton were likely to happen again, urging the public to be alert. The media would print statements from police or local councillors about what they would do 'next time', with descriptions of any immediate precautions that had already been put in place. Interviews with Mods or Rockers themselves about their plans for 'revenge' against their rivals would also be printed. Cohen (1972) argued that these 'predictions' operated to *trigger off* events of a similar order by preparing the public to be ready and by offering the potential Mod or Rocker the symbols and stage directions with which and upon which he/she was to perform. Even when no such event transpired where it was expected to, the media would write stories about the kinds of things that *could* have happened and were narrowly missed. What Cohen (1972) detected was that the 'reaction' to the Mods and Rockers had become something more than the amplification cycle was able to explain. Indeed, the key processes of the media as described by Wilkins (exaggeration, distortion, prediction and symbolization) appeared to be having an amplification effect *independent* of actual events.

Cohen (1972) observed a set of phases in the episode: first, there was the *initial deviance* (the events in Clacton). This was followed, second, by an *inventory phase* where the seriousness of the event and subsequent episodes were talked about in the media in exaggerated terms. Third, the public, the police and the press were then *sensitized* to reinterpret neutral or ambiguous stimuli as potentially or actually deviant as they formed opinions and attitudes about the issue in a sense-making phase. These opinions and attitudes would interact and augment each other to produce an *overestimation* of the deviance which then led to an *escalation* of control towards the Mods and the Rockers in a rescue and remedy phase. Cohen (1972) identified that each phase had a larger problem before it and a sharper idea of what the problem exactly was

than the preceding phase had, as each phase circulated around and interacted with each of the other phases (the inventory with the sense-making phase; the sense-making phase with the rescue and remedy phase and so forth). As each phase passed, the 'problem' became more removed from what was really happening. Moral panic could be conceptualized, as a result, as a reaction to a condition, person or group of persons that is or who are defined as a threat that is *out of proportion* to any actual threat it or they may pose.

*Folk Devils* is often called to account for its emphasis upon describing 'what' happened in the Mods and Rockers episode and 'how' it came to be seen as a much larger problem than it actually was at the expense of addressing 'why' it occurred (see Jefferson, 2008; Shuker, Openshaw, & Soler, 1990). But the 'why' *was* attended to in the study, albeit briefly. Cohen (1972) interpreted the clashes on the beaches as a response to an emerging consumer culture which was characterized by high wages and a commercial youth movement that embraced fashion and idolized wild pop heroes (such as *The Rolling Stones* and *The Who*). The newly affluent teenagers (the Mods) could revel in this emerging scene, but for working-class teens (the Rockers), there were still structural barriers to participation. These teens (the Rockers) would rebel against their situation and create their own excitement on the beaches, where their rivals (the Mods) would join them. Cohen (1972) located the response to these clashes (the ensuing moral panic) as a retort by the older generation to the permissive post-war society that had allowed for this consumer culture (and its differential access) to develop. Other social changes, such as the abolishment of conscription from 1961 in the UK, may be seen to have deepened the sense of concern about youth having no discipline when compared with their parents and grandparents.

## Policing the Crisis

Cohen's (1972) moral panic is understood largely as an unintended and unanticipated construction. In part, this reflects the influence of theories of social constructionism that were still dominant in criminological

thinking in the early 1970s. Further towards the end of the decade, a group of scholars from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham employed the concept to understand how a brutal robbery of an Irishman by a group of black youths in Handsworth, England in 1972, had initiated a resounding press, judicial and public response about a ‘frightening new strain’ of crime known only to date in America—mugging. Yet, the event, though horrific, was neither new in its character nor particularly unusual.

Sceptical about the speed in which the idea of mugging took hold, and about the re-articulation of old forms of street crime under this new and imported label, Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts (1978) observed that a set of relations between the media and elite bodies was important in the development of how mugging was represented. They found that the media turn to ‘accredited experts’ in order to maintain the news values of ‘impartiality’ and ‘objectivity’, and these experts, in turn, become *primary definers* in that they are able to frame how events will be reported upon by the media. Hall et al. (1978) also saw that the media became *secondary definers* as they transformed these primary definitions into everyday language as they ‘spoke’ to the public. The media also ‘spoke back’ to elites, claiming to speak *for* the public. Primary definers who would call upon this voice as evidence that further assertions about the threats of mugging were required (or desired), and these assertions would then be used to support additional secondary interpretations. In other words, the amplification cycle that would create an *ideological closure* around the issue of mugging would be set in motion by virtue of *routine news practices* and the *structural reciprocal relations* between the media and their institutional sources (see Jefferson, 2008).

Hall et al. (1978) also examined the significance of the folk devil (the mugger) in the panic in a more extensive way than what Cohen (1972) did. To do this, they looked at what was happening in the wider socio-political environment at that time. Drawing from the work of Antonio Gramsci, they argued that the early 1970s was a period where hegemony—consent to authority—was in crisis and that this was due, in large part, to the economic recession. They concluded that the specific concern about mugging would operate to redirect social

anxieties away from the real issue to one about ‘law and order’. In order for dominant interests to remain dominant, the periodic failure of capitalism needed to be shielded from popular view, and this was achieved by ‘whipping up’ an issue as a problem that could be held responsible for the deprecation of a respectable work ethic (which was related to a decline in jobs) at the same time as it would unite the lower and middle classes. This issue would be *race*. Indeed, the response evolved into a notion that the British ‘way of life’ was at threat and installed a perception that the weak liberalist position that Britain had taken on law and order issues in the post-war period was to blame. In turn, this would justify a series of severe control measures that were directed at black inner city youth who were seen to be responsible for the wholesale denigration of the moral fabric.

Effectively, *Policing the Crisis* reworked the understanding of power in a moral panic insofar as the official reaction was seen as not just reactive, but ‘part of the circle out of which “moral panics” develop’ (Hall et al., 1978, p. 52). Moral panic is defined (or redefined) as an ideological event in which a specific and historical crisis is developed and managed, which in turn suggests that there is a necessary collusion between each party involved in its construction: the government, interest groups and the media. It also suggests that there will be, or *can* be, very little opposition. This all sounds very conspiratorial in today’s climate. The UK government has tried very hard in the recent past to undermine the BBC, and the BBC itself publically states and defends its independence from political interests (Kanter, 2014). Thus, any suggestion that there might be a relationship between the two would be a contested one. The American context, where President Trump actively calls out journalists for presenting ‘fake news’, definitely dismisses any collusion between the press and political elites there. And the idea that panic could be ‘whipped up’ by those in power has certainly had some implications for how *Policing the Crisis* has been received. I consider these implications in detail in this chapter where I discuss the critiques directed at moral panic.

## The Social Construction of Deviance

In this section, I take a look at moral panic as it has been conceived in the American context through the work of Eric Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1994a, 1994b). For these two scholars, the set of phases that Cohen (1972) observed were not particularly conducive for understanding the development of panics that emerged in the USA. There, the media are less centralized and tend to rely less on sensationalist journalism than do the British press (Critchler, 2003; Victor, 1998). Therefore, the ways by which a local event is transformed into a general problem depend more upon the rhetorical activities of interested parties and their access to the appropriate channels. To account for this nuance, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994a, 1994b) situated the trajectory of moral panic within a collective behaviour framework, defining the concept as an irrational group reaction or 'a kind of fever ... characterised by heightened emotion, fear, dread, anxiety, hostility and a strong sense of righteousness' (1994a, p. 31). Like in Cohen's (1972) work, there is a concern for the processes of definition, but there is astutely more of a focus on organized interests and the role of claims-makers, their alliances and the ways in which they seek to gain public attention (and support). For Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994a, 1994b), a panic can be distinguished from other, more general social problems with the identification of five 'criteria'.<sup>1</sup> First, there must be a heightened *concern* over the behaviour of a group and the consequences this behaviour poses for wider society. We can measure the manifestation of this concern through opinion polls, proposed legislation, interest group calls for action to be taken, social movement activity and by public commentary by way of media attention (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994b). Second, a dichotomization occurs between 'them' (the folk devils) and 'us' (the responsible and law-abiding citizens). The behaviour of the folk devils (them) is seen to be threatening to the values, interests and, possibly, the very existence of society as 'we' know it, and there is *hostility* towards this outsider. Often this involves identifying the deviant in terms of a stereotype (the Mod or the Rocker and his style of dress and

demeanour; the ‘mugger’ and his ethnicity and/or class position). Third, there must be a *consensus* within society, or at least considerable segments of it, that the threat proposed is very real and serious: that inconceivable practices such as satanic ritual abuse, for example, not only exist but also are prolific across a nation’s communities. Further, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994b) are firm that what characterizes a panic is *disproportionality*. In a panic, the threat, costs and figures proposed by claimsmakers are wildly exaggerated and do not coincide with an objective reality. Finally, moral panics are *volatile*. They typically explode, reach a pitch and then subside just as suddenly. Some panics leave no impact on the legal, moral and social fabric, whilst others become institutionalized as organizations are established to deal with the ‘problem’. Even so, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994b) argue that all panics leave informal traces which in effect prepare a community for later panics. Panics often create labels, for example, such as ‘video nasty’ and ‘boy racer’, which function to help name (and understand) new events and behaviours.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994a, 1994b) further argued that panics could be usefully categorized in terms of three distinct models differentiated by dimensions of motive and responsibility. In a *grassroots* panic, it is the deeply felt attitudes and sentiments of a broad area of lay society that appear threatened, though concern may also manifest within other sectors such as the media or amongst political bodies. In an *interest group* panic, the cause tends to be ideological or moral or to do with advancing a material or status position of a group.<sup>2</sup> In an *elite engineered* panic, panic processes are employed by powerful groups to avoid a genuine solution to a real problem whose presentation would undermine elite interests. We might position Cohen’s (1972) case study as an interest group panic and Hall et al.’s (1978) analysis of mugging as a classic example of an elite engineered one. However, all three are to be seen as ‘ideal types’ that when applied will illustrate different aspects of a given panic. Indeed, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994a) suggest further that no panic is explicable by means of a single configuration. The grassroots version, for instance, cannot take account of how raw concerns are intensified and mobilized, and so some insights from the other models are required in the analysis stage.



## The Original Project

Virtually, all panic case studies have drawn on one or another of these three foundational works, and so collectively, they can be seen as the ‘original project’ of moral panic. It is a project with two different strands, however. Thompson (1998) argues that studies undertaken in the American context tend to favour analysis through Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s (1994a, 1994b) interest group model, and so they focus on the work of claims-makers in panic development. Early works include Joel Best’s research into understandings of victimized children (1990), Philip Jenkins’ (1998) analysis of the construction of child molesters and Mary de Young’s (2004) study of the satanic ritual abuse phenomenon. Research done elsewhere tends to draw more upon Cohen’s (1972) and Hall et al.’s (1978) studies and their understanding of the media as a claims-maker *and* as the primary institutional vehicle for the dispersing of claims.<sup>3</sup> Critcher (2003) views two distinct formulations of panic within the original project: one argues for processes at work (Cohen; Hall et al.) whilst the other sees that there are attributes that can be identified (Goode & Ben-Yehuda). Correspondingly, he argues that we term the first a *processual model of moral panic* and the second an *attributional model of moral panic*. Critcher (2003) argues that in practice, it is the processual model that grasps the common features between panics (an issue emerges as a threat, moral entrepreneurs support it, experts pronounce diagnoses and the state institutes repressive measures) whereas some of the attributes of Good and Ben-Yehuda’s model have proved problematic (concern and consensus, in particular, are noted to be difficult to measure). Moreover, Cohen’s (1972) model is the most employed and best understood within the panic literature.

## Implications

Cohen (1972, p. 172) ended *Folk Devils* with a prediction that there would be more episodes like the one he had studied and that other ‘as yet nameless folk devils will be created’. Perhaps this is why he established some scaffolding for a panic ‘model’ in his opening paragraph. However,

in the introduction to the second edition of *Folk Devils* (Cohen, 1980), he expressed concern that he might have conveyed that there was a sense of timelessness about the particular set of processes that he had observed. He noted that the recent developments in social theory to that date, particularly cultural studies and deviancy theory, were more attentive to issues of structure and culture, and that as a result, action undertaken by folk devils could be better understood as stemming from particular structural positions and as particular forms of resistance. Similarly, the reaction could be understood in the light of a society increasingly concerned with issues of law and order in an era marked by deep social crevices (i.e. Hall et al., 1978). In the introduction to his third edition in 2002, he noted that sophisticated understandings of claims-making practices (i.e. Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994a, 1994b) and the conception of the modern era as a 'risk society' each offered key ways to extend the study of panics. Later, in 2011, he wrote that we could now make a distinction between old and new panics insofar as contemporary panics have new forms and features about them that are different from those of the past (Cohen, 2011). Old panics tend to be elite engineered whereas new panics are those initiated by social movements and victims' groups. Old panics would *sometimes* bring about new laws, whereas new panics *are likely* to result in fresh rules, regulations or criminal codes. Some new panics are about exposing denial, cover-ups and unjust tolerances. This to some degree speaks to the notion that there can be good panics and bad panics, which I examine more closely in Chap. 3.

Other theorists have also noted the changing shape of material panics. Goode (2012), for example, makes a distinction between macro-panics (where a whole society, or a good sized proportion of it, are up in arms) and micro-panics (where moral minorities and specialized interest groups are up in arms). In post-modern pluralistic society, Goode (2012) argues, it is increasingly difficult to arouse concern amongst large sectors of society. We need a concept that is at the same time microscopic (to help us view and unpack micro-panics) and able to cast a wide angle lens (to help us understand the connection between these micro-panics) (Goode, 2012). We might, he says, with lots of re-research and re-conceptualizing, come to think of panic quite differently to how we do at the moment.

What is clear from the enormous field of enquiry that has developed since *Folk Devils* is that a conceptual, transferable model of panic is valuable. Nonetheless, the intimacy with which Cohen (1972) developed the concept in relation to the Mods and Rockers, and the way by which Hall et al. (1978) exposed the structural relationship between the state and the civil sphere, identifying in course how political processes can operate in the distortion of reality in their analysis of the mugging phenomenon, demonstrates that the concept is relative to real-life, on-the-ground-happening events: *material* episodes of panic. Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994a, 1994b) identification of three models differentiated by the variables of motive and responsibility also supports the need for empirical assessments of material events, insofar as it understands that some of the attributes will be achieved via different means and others would play out according to who was driving the respective campaign. What is more, *context* matters when developing an abstract way to understand what is happening on the ground. That two distinct models have emerged, each designed to capture the nuances of episodes in two different contexts (the processual model for a British context; the attributional model for an American context—see Critcher, 2003), attests to this. These two observations, together with Becker's (1998) contention that the case should decide the concept, form the basis of the inductive approach to moral panic developed here.

Indeed, to reiterate, my central argument is that the study of panic should always be a study of a material reaction, situated within its particular social and historical context, *in a first instance*. Whilst an understanding of panic's established conceptual parameters, as developed by the scholars of the original project of moral panic, should guide empirical research, we need to move beyond ticking off stages and identifying criteria once and for all. We also need to have a way to approach *deviant* cases (such as terrorism—see Walsh, 2016), cases that extend beyond what the model is able to capture (such as Ecstasy—see Critcher, 2000) and cases that didn't quite fit (such as drug-facilitated sexual assault—see Moore, 2009). We further need to be able to answer questions about why this or that case, which had all the ingredients for panic, *didn't* eventuate (see, e.g. Jenkins, 2009; Wozniak, 2016). A framework that can enable us to study the materiality of on-the-ground-happening panics and social reactions that resemble panics, in whatever size or shape

they come, but at the same time name them and connect them under the conceptual umbrella of ‘moral panic’, is long overdue.

Indeed, one of the main critiques directed at the concept of moral panic is that it is outdated and can no longer help us to ‘make sense’ of social reactions in a world that has undergone some radical changes since the 1960s and 1970s. In Chap. 3, I take a closer look at this criticism, as well as a number of others that have been raised.

## Notes

1. Social problems are void of the folk devils upon whom the anxiety of the public is projected and lack the characteristic ‘fever’ of a panic. Moral crusades, on the other hand, are mobilized by specific moral entrepreneurs who adopt an issue to further their own interests. A panic may result from a crusade, but in the main, a panic will have a variety of interested parties, and either advertently or inadvertently will appeal to a wider and more diverse constituency (see Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994b; Critcher, 2003).
2. Although invariably, there is a “happy coincidence” of both principle and interest (Thompson, 1998, p. 9).
3. Jenkins (1992), for example, makes an outright denial that the media can create a panic.

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Making Sense of Moral Panics

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