

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS MORAL PANIC?

In our information-saturated-and-mediated social environment, it is increasingly common to see or hear the reactions to a social condition described as a “moral panic.” Most of us are likely familiar with the term as a pop culture buzzword used to oversimplify a situation and to minimize or dismiss concerns about it as “hyperbole” or “hysteria.” For sure, today, as always, there are troublesome conditions that do and should provoke our fear, but to call all reactions moral panic is to not only misuse the idea, but also to lose its value in helping us make sense of social dynamics that should intrigue us as social workers. Since its conventional development more than five decades ago, the framework of moral panic has sustained significant academic influence in a vast and well-vetted body of theoretical and empirical sociological and criminological analyses of various social welfare problems and policy areas. The background that follows provides a basic sketch or “aerial” view of moral panic sufficient to begin our understanding of its essential features.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL ORIGINS

Although the first references to moral panic can be found in early 19th century religious texts,* its contemporary use traces back to 1964 in

*For an example, see Hodge (1830).

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McLuhan's seminal communications theory text.* Later that decade, influenced by the emergence of the "new sociology" and its revolutionary interactionist approach to social deviance (detailed in chapter 2: "Social Deviance and Social Problems"), the concept of moral panic was fleshed out and formalized. Credited to the works of sociologists Jock Young (*The Drugtakers*, 1971), Stan Cohen (*Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 1972), and later, Stuart Hall and colleagues (*Policing the Crisis*, 1978), its original application was used in studies of delinquency, illicit drug use, and street crimes in British society in the 1960s and early 1970s, a period of immense social turbulence and loosening of traditional authority and middle-class values† (Rohloff et al., 2013; Young, 2007).

For the purpose of describing moral panic, we start with two concise definitions put forth by its progenitors. The first comes from S. Cohen's (1972) study of rival youth subcultures (the "Mods" and the "Rockers") and an outbreak of highly publicized youth delinquency events in the 1960s that induced exaggerated great panic and official reactions. As such, he described moral panic as when

a condition, episode, persons or group . . . emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned . . . socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved . . . the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates. (S. Cohen, 1972, p. 1)

Subsequently, Hall and colleagues (1978) applied the concept to their study of street crime in the 1970s; that study found that the media, together with law enforcement, reported and disseminated "official" data to construct and racialize a new crime, "mugging." They defined moral panic this way:

When official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when "experts"

*Although not about moral panic, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* by Marshall McLuhan (1964) is a classic work on the impact of mass media in contemporary society. Famously noting that "the medium is the message," its theories endure as an influence on many social theorists and academics.

†The moral panic framework was popularized by these early writings and soon became influential within criminology and sociology, particularly studies of deviance and social problems (see Rohloff et al., 2013).

perceive the threat in all but identical terms, and . . . talk “with one voice” of rates, diagnoses, prognoses, and solutions, when the media representations universally stress “sudden and dramatic” increases (in numbers involved or events) and “novelty,” above and beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain. (Hall et al., 1978, p. 20)

With this initial understanding, we can now begin to unpack some of the bigger ideas within moral panic, and we start by considering what exactly is meant by both “the moral” and “the panic.”

The Moral

The reason for calling it a moral [emphasis in original] panic is precisely to indicate that the perceived threat is not to something mundane . . . but a threat to the social order itself or an idealized (ideological) conception of some part of it.

—K. Thompson (1998, p. 8)

With our fire-and-brimstone Puritanical roots, a deep sense of morality has always driven the ideals and identities of Americans, and in this “nation with the soul of a church,” we are particularly godly sorts (Morone, 2003, p. 1). From abolitionists and prohibitionists to civil rights and the Religious Right, our traditions of moral fervor dictate the social problems we debate, the policies we enact, and the reforms we aspire toward (J. M. Johnson, 1985). In this way, *the moral* reflects society’s normative aspects—its collective values, “shoulds,” and notions of “right” and “wrong” (Ben-Yehuda, 1990). Yet beyond the sanctity of these values is what they mean and what they symbolize, and, as we’ll see, policy debates are always about more than just a given social problem. By understanding the moral, we begin to understand that “something else” is being fought for. As such, key to understanding the moral lies in recognizing the values expressed at the surface level of policy debates as well as at a deeper, existential level—for example, in defense of “our way of life,” “the good old days,” and “traditional family”:

You cannot have a moral panic unless there is something morally to panic about, although it may not be the actual object of fear but a displacement of another fear, or, more frequently, a mystification of the true threat of the actual object of dismay. (Young, 2007, p. 60)

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Although it is certainly true that society cannot legislate morality, it can and does enact policies that empower and defend some notions of morality over others, and this moral judgment greatly impacts not just policy making but its distribution of rights, prestige, and benefits (Duster, 1970; Morone, 1997). Americans have historically projected immorality onto the actions of marginalized populations—especially those with unfamiliar languages and/or customs—and in this, we can see how competing notions of morality become linked to social and political power (Mooney, 2001; Morone, 1997).

The way in which moral judgments come to be “legitimized” as policies is known as *symbolic politics* (Gusfield, 1963/1986), and understanding this helps us see how moral conflict is linked to political power. As such, the moral also reflects the conflict between differing social values whereby some values become empowered over others, and enacted social policies reflect these outcomes (Ben-Yehuda, 1990). When we identify the “winning” values embedded in a social policy, we see the power bases the policy supports as well as how the “losing” values and the groups that hold them become marginalized. Indeed, by recognizing the consternation aroused by perceived threats to the moral we see its direct link to the panic.

The Panic

Despite our precious freedoms and privileged status as a superpower nation, the American public succumbs to stifling panic and fear with relative ease (Robin, 2006; Stearns, 2009). This condition of dread amid contemporary living has grown increasingly pervasive in the wake of ongoing erosion of social (government) protection from the forces of globalization and privatization and has undermined trust in the ability of our institutions to keep us safe. Amid this climate of apprehension and uncertainty, what Bauman (2007) calls our “liquid times,” episodes of moral panic have become our “new normal” (Furedi, 2011): “The social world of the USA and other societies at the beginning of the twenty-first century is one of a pervasive insecurity. . . . In this social world, moral panics are part of the infrastructure . . .” (Feeley & Simon, 2007, p. 46).

Best understood in collective, social psychological terms, *the panic* is akin to the sudden and excessive reaction to natural disaster, a highly irrational state of alarm that leads to irrational and excessive efforts to restore a sense of safety (S. Cohen, 1972, 2002; Critcher & Pearce, 2013;

Garland, 2008; Rohloff et al., 2013). Although panic and fear in light of some incidents or conditions may certainly make sense, in moral panic, these reactions are excessive and/or exaggerated relative to the objective threat the feared condition poses and, in actuality, reflect displaced fears about more deeply rooted (i.e., structural) social problems that are complicated and difficult to address (Garland, 2008; Young, 2007):

Although it is perfectly possible that the actual object of panic does not exist, the panic is about a moral problem of real dimensions . . . the objects of panic do represent a direct threat to the core values, the strategies of discipline and the justifications of rewards of kind rather in a material sense. (Young, 2007, p. 60)

Importantly though, whereas the moral is visceral, the panic is mediated through our mass exposure to provocative news media and various forms of popular entertainment that cultivate fearful and distorted views of the world (Altheide, 2002; Altheide & Michalowski, 1999; Romer et al., 2014). By arousing and instilling public panic, this toxic “discourse of fear” has major social implications and enables policymakers to increase and consolidate political power and garner support for favored policy responses (Bauman, 2007; Glassner, 1999/2009; Robin, 2006; Walby & Spencer, 2011). Indeed, a fearful public aids those in power* as a form of social control that represses social justice, democracy, and the pursuit of happiness (Altheide, 2002; Robin, 2006; Romer et al., 2014). As a ubiquitous and powerful force of daily living, fear operates independently of social problems by becoming a problem in itself, and the panic reminds us that policy making too often prioritizes addressing the fear of the problem more than the problem itself (Altheide, 2002; Stearns, 2009).

MORAL PANIC: PROCESS AND ATTRIBUTES

The works of the earliest moral panic theorists (S. Cohen, 1972; Hall et al., 1978; Young, 1971) compose what is known as the *processual* approach, the “British” version of moral panic that emphasizes identifying and studying the progression of their dynamics and how they result in expanded social control mechanisms (Citcher, 2003). Roughly

*On the other hand, powerful groups themselves sometimes fear groups with less power due to guilt for ongoing social inequities and/or the fear of social uprising and loss of power (see Robin, 2006).

two decades after this approach was formulated, the influential work of Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994, 2009) in *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* developed the *attributional* model of moral panic. The so-called American formulation, this approach emphasizes the identifiable traits that construct moral panic episodes and stresses the influence of claims-makers on constructing social problems (Critcher, 2003).

Processes of Moral Panic

Theorized as a series of societal reactions to exaggerated perceptions of events or perceived threats, the works of S. Cohen and Hall and others laid the ground work for understanding the processual model in seven stages: (1) The condition or behavior emerges as a societal threat and is followed by (2) a media inventory (or depiction) of the situation that is exaggerated, distorted, dire, and heavily symbolic; (3) the claims-making activities of moral entrepreneurs and “right-thinking people” man the “moral barricades” of society as (4) various experts weigh in on the severity of the problem and add to a sense of urgency. Soon after, (5) a method of coping or resolving the problem is acted on until, finally, (6) the moral panic fades away; however, in its wake, (7) the moral panic leaves a legacy of permanent and often harsh societal (policy) changes (Critcher, 2003).*

In the third edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, S. Cohen (2002) further articulated that this process requires three elements: (1) enemies (or folk devils), “a soft target, easily denounced, with little power”; (2) victims “someone with whom you can identify, someone who could have been and one day could be anybody”; and (3) a dynamic of societal consensus such that “something was done” about the social condition (p. xii). Consequently, this process of aggregate (consensual) blame of folk devils (enemies) for a concerning social condition relieves deeper feelings of fear and insecurity among the so-called victims (Hall et al., 1978).

The processual model highlights the importance of understanding the sociocultural history, social relations, and political power differences between the folk devil group and society as well as how officials react to mediated public fears that exaggerate a given social

*Stages 2 through 5 are not necessarily linear and may reinforce and/or feed off of each other, either enabling or preventing progression to subsequent stages (see Critcher, 2003).

problem. These official (i.e., government) reactions lead to increasingly punitive state control that gradually wins over a silent majority* and legitimizes the increased reach of the criminal justice system in ways that benefit political elites (Watney, 1988). As such, the processual approach encourages us to consider why moral panic occurred when it did and around what social problem(s) it took form. This historic emphasis is utilized throughout the topical chapters of the book.

Attributes of Moral Panic

Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) attributional formulation of moral panic is heavily influenced by social constructionism and the influence of claims-makers and the media in constructing as social problems the conditions that become a focus of moral panic (Cricher, 2003). The key distinction of the approach lies with its formulation of what moral panics consist of such that they occur as more than just a process and that they comprise five discernable traits or attributes:† concern, disproportionality, hostility, consensus, and volatility (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, 2009).‡ The first attribute, societal *concern* about a particular social condition, becomes evident among a critical mass of influential or otherwise powerful constituents, and the emotional dynamics of this concern provide energy and impetus for action. Concern can be observed in several ways—for example, through public opinion polls, social movements, and/or in heightened and sustained media attention to a given social condition. Yet most important is that the concern being expressed is disproportionate to what is “normal” or typical for the social condition and is depicted in a manner that is objectively worse than its actual threat. Conveyed via media coverage, political discourse, and high-profile claims-makers, indicators of *disproportionality* include citations of false or misleading statistics, the

**Silent majority* refers to a large, usually powerful portion of the population (e.g., a significant voting bloc) who do not openly express their views of such changes and thus allow them to go unchallenged such that they gradually become permanent.

†Although these attributes were identified in the original British processual models, they were examined and articulated much further in the works of Goode and Ben-Yehuda.

‡Except for volatility, which can only be determined after the moral panic has ended, these attributes need not occur and/or emerge in any particular order.

presence of little or no credible evidence that the threat actually exists, and extravagant claims about the damage the condition will cause if ignored. As such, disproportionality is at the core of the attributional approach (Critcher, 2003; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, 2009).

The third attribute, *hostility*, is expressed toward the folk devils that are blamed for the threatening social condition. Facilitated by deviant labeling, expressions of anger, resentment, and/or moral outrage toward these enemies becomes “justifiable” and easier to express (Young, 2007, 2009). Hostility is discerned through inflammatory political discourse and stereotyped media depictions that caricature, diminish, and/or reinforce negative beliefs about folk devils, and/or acts of violence or victimization against them. The fourth attribute, *consensus*, occurs when there is sufficient agreement not only that the threatening social condition exists, but also that “something should be done” about it. As with concern, consensus does not have to be universal but, rather, needs only to be present among significant constituents, such as societal elites, influential groups, and the media. For our purposes, consensus is also reflected in the enactment of policy or when official actions are taken to address the concern.

The emotional intensity and frantic nature of moral panics coupled with limited attention spans and rapid news cycles render moral panic episodes unsustainable for extended periods (S. Cohen, 1972, 2002; Critcher, 2003; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, 2009). Thus, the final attribute, *volatility*, is identified after some official action has been taken and hysteria about the social condition ends or fades—regardless of whether the feared condition is actually resolved—and reminds us of the cyclical nature of moral panic.

Although distinguishing the processual and attributional approaches is of theoretical interest, doing so in practice is irrelevant for our purposes given that both approaches agree that moral panics are recurrent features of contemporary society and have significant consequences on policy making (Critcher, 2016). There is considerable overlap among the approaches, and they are not mutually exclusive, but matters of “methodological purity” in determining whether moral panic has occurred and how best to study them as social phenomena are beyond the scope of this book. Our interest is in understanding their various component parts in relation to macro-level dynamics and policy making, and in doing so, we utilize both perspectives by recognizing their complementarity.

MORAL PANIC MODELS

An important insight gained by studying moral panic comes from identifying the social players that foster their dynamics, to what end, and for whose benefit. This line of inquiry enables us to understand power dynamics in society and, just as importantly, the social problem(s) being ignored amid the commotion. To this end, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994, 2009) have articulated three different types of moral panic—elite-engineered, grassroots, and interest group—that provide insight into their causes and the motivations of different social power bases.

Elite-Engineered Moral Panics

The *elite-engineered moral panic* is rooted in the Marxist theory that sociopolitical power lies with a handful of powerful individuals who wield disproportionate influence and can thus construct “reality” in ways to serve their interests over those of society at large. These elite groups—including leaders of government, the military, corporations, and media moguls—occupy and control our major social institutions. As a numerically small group, they are particularly insular (i.e., they stick to themselves) and have shared interests in maintaining their wealth, status, and power. In serving themselves, elites will engineer and manipulate social conditions conducive to generating moral panic when needed. With the ability to persuade the masses to tolerate or accept the status quo, elite-engineered moral panic is a mechanism of social control. An example of this model is our decades-long War on Drugs and the political discourse of U.S. presidents (notably Richard M. Nixon and Ronald Reagan) filled with exaggerated claims and blatant lies that have helped sustain public fears about illicit drugs (Hawdon, 2001).

Grassroots Moral Panics

In contrast, *grassroots moral panics* originate from the lower strata of the societal hierarchy and proceed in a bottom-up rather than top-down direction. Instead of reflecting the machinations of a small group of elites, grassroots moral panic occurs due to “populist” societal reactions to deeply held concerns by a sizable portion of the population, typically the “victims.” The excesses of corporate greed and malfeasance as well as a mistrust of the rich and powerful often fan popular

conspiracies and urban myths that enflame grassroots fear. The media, claims-makers, and moral entrepreneurs play a central role in this type of moral panic, encouraging mobilization (action) by projecting and linking grassroots fear onto a social condition or folk devil. The Salem witch trials of the early 17th century are a classic example of a grassroots panic in which widely held (grassroots) fears of Satan, fostered by religious leaders, were projected onto persons labeled witches (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, 2009).

Interest Group Moral Panics

The third type, *interest group moral panics*, holds that societal interest groups, distinct from grassroots activism and independent of the influence of elites, cause moral panic to advance their own financial, political, or ideological positions. Interest groups, such as law enforcement, religious and/or educational associations, professional groups (e.g., the American Medical Association, the American Bar Association), lobbyists, and social activists draw attention to a social issue or concern relevant to them and encourage the emotional furor of the grassroots reaction to propel policy making and/or enforcement actions. An example of an interest group moral panic is the “reefer madness” that started in the 1930s and was largely instigated and sustained by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, which gained institutional relevance and power, first by creating and then enforcing marijuana prohibition (Becker, 1963/1991).

Importantly, none of these approaches alone can fully explain the occurrence and cause of moral panic, and, instead, an integration of the grassroots and interest group approaches is most explanatory (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, 2009). For example, by operating together with grassroots groups, interest group moral panics further the causes and crusades of moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963/1991). Indeed, when attention is drawn to an issue by interest groups, the broader public (i.e., the grassroots) acknowledges its urgency and seizes it for their own purposes. Yet, whereby grassroots concern provides emotional “kindling,” this alone is insufficient to start a moral panic without a media platform and the “megaphone” of interest groups:

Grassroots outrage provides context . . . an issue around which a panic coalesces—the content of the panic. It loads the gun, so to speak. Interest-group activism helps explain the timing of moral panics; they act as a kind of triggering device. (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 70)

There are some misgivings about each of these approaches. For example, although acknowledging the outsized influence of elites may seem disempowering, there is no doubt that such strata (and individuals) have always existed and perhaps never more significantly than in our “new gilded era” of the 21st century. Importantly, though, the elite-engineered approach should prompt us all to ask, “Who runs things?” The influence of interest groups should also be scrutinized, but social workers must bear in mind that our political arm, the NASW, is an interest group as are many other non-social work groups aligned with our values and concerns. Furthermore, in our professional and personal lives, we are among the grassroots, and social activism is an important vehicle of macro-level social work practice. As such, we should ask in times of moral panic, “Whose side are we on?” (S. Cohen, 2011).

These approaches provide important insights for analyzing causes and motivations for moral panic by illuminating dynamics of social power and vested interests. Yet, none should be seen as being “correct” or “wrong” but, rather, considered on its own merit and applied accordingly. Indeed, the three models are most useful as heuristics for understanding the causes and motivation of moral panic, and in helping us to see “the big picture.”