

'A moral panic model is ultimately too crude to encompass the full range of factors which influence the course and outcomes of reaction to a "new" social problem.'

There are two key models used in defining if social problems can be classified as a moral panic. I will be focusing on the (British) *Processual Model*, developed by Stanley Cohen following his research into news coverage and police reactions with *Mods and Rockers* in the 1960's.

Using the two case studies of paedophilia and video nasties I will be exploring if Cohen's model successfully encompasses all the factors that influence social problems into becoming seen as moral panics and covers the associated outcomes/reactions.

Cohen created the *processual model* after studying how the labeling of particular groups or individuals as deviant was paired with over-exaggeration in news reporting becoming represented as the cause of social problems. He suggested those in power attributed 'folk devil' labels to particular groups or individual who then became stigmatised and potentially behaved in worse ways than they did before through an amplification process.

Sullivan (2012) writes that Cohen used the term moral panics in reference to describing 'very strong, negative, public reactions to the spread of a new social behavior' (Pg.29) where an overreaction response makes the 'accommodation to new social behavior difficult' (Pg.29).

ONE: 'The initial deviation or impact phase' (Thompson, 1998, Pg.32). A social problem emerges that is deemed as a new and harmful threat to society:

To a degree the construction of the term paedophile fits this first stage. There was no definition or use in early society and it was 'not in standard dictionaries before 1973 or in *The Times Index* before 1977'

(Critcher, 2003, Pg.100). Despite this it has had numerous and regular re-occurrences as a panic, leading to Critcher (2003) describing this case study as a 'serial moral panic...feeding on itself' (Pg.112).

Contradicting the model, the label of the paedophile emerged before paedophilia was seen/acknowledged as a new social problem (and became a panic) but in its development a whole range of deeply embedded connotations have been constructed surrounding the paedophile and their ever-existing constant harm to children.

Though the crime existed pre-label, early constructions of the paedophile are contradictory with links to fears of a network of trafficking, child pornography, and satanic cult-like child abductions and murders (Jenkins, 1992, Hendershott, 2002) whilst having past been associated to homosexuality (Jenkins, 1992, Pg.75) and the mentally ill (Franklin, 1999, Pg.217). A conflicting notion of the paedophile, sick and unable to help/stop their urges whilst also evil and not wanting to stop/enjoying what they do to children, forms them as the ultimate deviant.

In the case of video nasties two separate occurrences are highlighted to of taken place with the similarities of each resulting in a 'double panic' (Critcher, 2003, Pg.64). Whilst there is a contradiction to the model in the lack of a human folk devil (deviant) a 'new' threat was established in the early 80's through the coincidental occurrence of exploitive cinema and horror genre films being made at the same time as technological advances in VCR.

The term itself became known as a collective label for the films deemed immoral/inappropriate (criticised for violent and shocking content) after its use in a 1993 *Sunday Times Article* (Critcher, 2003). What resulted was an escalation in the construction of videos/technology as a threat to society, with the increased popularity of home video recorders being connected to the availability of films with explicit/gore content, harmful because anyone (children) could watch or access the films.

The second occurrence of the nasties was instead focused on the accessibility of films already censored. Following the death of two-year-old *James Bulger* the trials judge commented on a similarity in the murder

to the use of blue paint in a scene from the film *Childs Play 3* (1991) resulting in an escalation of exaggerated/fixated news coverage of the film causing the murder (Thompson, 1998, Pg.103). Despite being disclaimed by a police officer from the case *Sky TV* further invoked press coverage by banning the film after having been previously airing it (Thompson, 1998, Pg.105).

Once again the harm to children was the focal point of evidencing the existence of the social problem and its threat, technology/violent films, were constructed as negatively affecting children due to their impressionability, corrupting childhood innocence and making them violent/damaged.

Does the model account for the changes in the underlying fears of the two occasions of video nasties as a panic? Whilst in its origins the content of the videos was being judged in relation to notions of morality there were also underlying contextual based fears linking to the rapidly changing technology/society of that era and a potential generation gap. The second occurrence instead has a strong link to media effects theories with ideas of a passive audience believing and being influenced by the videos, becoming immoral themselves.

Fitting into the idea of the panics being formed around the media itself influencing audiences behaviors negatively. Drontner's (1992) label of 'media panics', a 'specific type of moral panic that surround the introduction of a new type of media or content genre' (2012, Sullivan, Pg.30), may be a better suited classification for this cases study. Essentially rather than deviants causing a social problem the panic was formed around the ability of making people deviant.

TWO: 'The inventory stage in which observers take stock of what they believe has happened' (Thompson, 1998, Pg.32). The media representations stereotype and report social issues in a particular over-exaggerated way, often inaccurate and sensationalised, and a folk devil is constructed, accountable for immoral behavior or responsible for the threat taking place:

In both case studies certain stories/events seemed to spark 'panics' through the links made between a horrific crime and the individual social problem. For paedophilia this was the murder of *Sarah Payne*, for

video nasties it was the *James Bugler* murder and trial where 'the *Daily Mirror* ran fourteen pages of coverage the day after the boys sentence, and *The Sun* fifteen' (Franklin, Pg.195).

The newspaper coverage of each case attempted to find/construct patterns which were not there to fit an existing story framework (Cohen, 2005, Pg.34) fixated on apparent links between crimes, connecting them to one other implying they were all related and happening due to the same underlying problem threatening society.

Furthering this is the extensive and sensationalised coverage in the reporting surrounding both case studies. Whilst supporting the model, discourse theory can also be applied here. Re-occurring words/phrases reinforce the stereotypical paedophile and with video nasties painted shocking/graphic imagery by explicitly detailing their content/reactions/harm (Citcher, 2003).

Linked to this stage is Cohen's argument of the amplification process of labeling deviancy, with the media's roll in enforcing stereotypes, patterns, and discourses, stigmatising marginalised groups into becoming scapegoats for societies problems and resulting in them conforming to their role and acting like they have been labeled.

Contradicting this neither case study feature this kind of folk devil and Cohen's argument that 'the media labeling of people as deviant or other...can become a self fulfilling prophecy' (Hodkinson, 2013, Pg.248) is problematic.

Though legal action was enforced on video shop owners they were never deemed as deviant, neither were the creators of the films, the social problem was inanimate thus any labeling as bad could not stigmatise. Likewise whilst the paedophile label may not be helpful in tackling issues of paedophilia and can stop those yet to have commit crimes seek help, it doesn't make people become paedophiles if they are not already. Furthering this, paedophiles don't fit the 'folk devil' label, as 'they aren't vulnerable or unfairly marginalized' (Collier, 2001).

Even though the media is highlighted as significant in the construction of the threats in both case studies there may be considerations aside from the intention of creating a folk devil, such how news values in reporting plays a part in the forming media constructions.

Particular stories (often shocking, extreme, entertaining) are deemed as more newsworthy thus focused on for sales/profit (O'Neill and Harcup, 2009). The attention grabbing headlines of both case studies coverage support this. Equally significant, constructing long-term narratives, linking stories through apparent patterns, builds an underlying framework easy to apply in reporting.

The target audience of the newspapers is also an important factor as the media constructions may be more about catering to a papers readership. For example, the contradictions between the stereotyped paedophile as a stranger and the reality of abuse coming from family members/close friends/authority figures known to the child may be more about not offending/upsetting readers, who are likely to be parents themselves.

Luce (2013) argues the moral panic model highlights how something that challenges or pushes societies boundaries at the time of its occurrence results in 'various discourses' that attempt to 'stabilize the conversation' (Pg.393). Whilst this may apply to understanding some of video nasties construction as a social problem it does not help to explain paedophilia.

An interesting point made by Finders and Wood (2012) may be helpful for this though, as they argue that the opposite of moral panics should also be considered in evaluating and understanding social problems, the idea of 'folk heroes' and 'moral euphoria'.

Societies' fixation on deviance is often paired with moralistic views of good and evil, heroes and villains. Individually and societally we categorise many aspects of reality to help us form understanding and creating binary is one way we do this. These constructions may be a way of attempting to understand why

the crimes associated to each social issue took place. With video nasties, for example creating a reason/explanation for children to kill.

Media representations use the same constructions and news media in particular use this structure to create narratives in their reporting. Whilst both case studies show evidence of this to a degree, paedophilia is the stronger of the two in supporting this argument through the connotations/stereotypes that have been constructed of the paedophile. Adding to this is the problematic notions that said stereotypes contradict both the nature of pedophiles and who they are most likely to be.

There is a misrepresentation in reporting with the paedophile constructed as a shady (middle aged male) figure that hangs around public spaces looking for children. In reality most cases show that the paedophile is normally a close friend, family member, or authorities figure who knows the child and has the trust/power to abuse them and keep it secret.

Cohen's model does not account for how the paedophile has been inaccurately constructed and why this may be. There is also a strong link to discourse theories, particularly language based, that's ideological in its terms like 'monster', 'beast', and 'evil' (Franklin, 1999, Pg.208/Pg.217) all of which dehumanise.

Another issue here is lack of argument or protest to the constructed paedophile and their threat. Whilst seen in today's society as dangerous and harmful paedophiles have become so demonized no serious attempt at tackling or preventing this social problem can take place.

In contrast video nasties have become regarded as the opposite of harmful and the genre is nostalgic to horror fans. The case of Bulger that still re-occurs in the media has become separate from video nasties and is often focused on updating/reminding the public of the killers.

THREE: Moral entrepreneurs claim that something needs to be done to tackle the social problem. **FOUR:** People who are deemed as experts of some kinds talk about the social problem and propose the solutions that need to take place

Cohen argues the 'media have long since operated as agents of moral indignation' with mass media as key 'in defining and shaping social problems' (2005, Pg.7). This was evidenced in both case studies through the campaign-like newspaper coverage. At the same time the press/media were not the only claim makers.

The quote is also problematic in that the media may not just hold intuitional power but be a tool that reflects already existing ideology/views/morals of elite societal groups (Curran, 2002). This would mean that rather than construct the social problems press/news media magnify existing issues, reflect public opinion, or work as a platform supporting the other agenda groups/claim makers.

With paedophilia, pressure groups were influential claim makers in the beginning but the press also took on the role of both the moral entrepreneurs and the experts. *The News Of The World* in particular with its long running campaign like stance, which Critcher (2003) suggests was the height of the social problem in 2000-2001. Whilst there were other experts, like NSPCC (Jenkins, 1992, Pg.121), varying levels of accountability was given by the press as the threat was seen as self-explanatory.

There were also no credible experts with video nasties, and the reports/stats/opinions/claims that were referenced by the press were later revealed as incorrect (Thompson, 1998, Pg.104). Christian pressure groups acted as moral entrepreneurs who used the threat of childhood innocence to further their attack on the videos/technology for their own underlying agendas.

This religious focus/influence/agenda is another area for further exploration the model does not account for. Neither is the link made between class and violence that was particularly evident in the second occurrence of video nasties. Social decline was evidenced through the supposedly bad parenting of the lower-class neglecting/unprotecting/abusing their children or irresponsibly allowing them access to video nasties (Critcher, 2003). Childhood and the symbolism surrounding both case studies is another potential area of exploration for furthering understanding the construction of social problems (Jenkins, 1992, Pg.10).

Response wise Jewkes (2011) critiques that the model fails to consider/account for justified reactions to crimes that legitimately offend or upset people (Pg.76-77) and Thibodeaux (2014) argues that focusing on reactions as disproportionate/exaggerated assumes a social problem has to correspond with some kind of established measuring or criteria of appropriate reaction or threat. Can the coverage of horrific crimes (in both case studies) and the genuine concerns of parents that sex offenders are living on their streets accurately be measured as exaggerated?

FIVE: Actions are put in place to act as a resolution for the social problem

With video nasties the governing legislations on the licensing of videos was eventually changed despite government reluctance. As sufficient laws were already in place the changes made and measures taken were 'more symbolic than effective' (Cricher, 2003, Pg.71). With paedophilia press campaigning and the public reactions that followed (Franklin, 1999, Pg.208-212) resulted in tightening/changed laws on *Sexual Offences Act (1997)*.

Response wise the model fails to cover how the misconceptions from the connotations and discourses surrounding the paedophile results in the real harm and threats to children being distorted/ignored. Kitzinger (1999) suggests the alienation and dehumanising of a small specific group of men as different from society and not like most/other men works to distance paedophilia from the family by placing it onto strangers.

By using the moral panic model in attempting to classify or understand paedophilia as a social problem Critcher (2003) argues we are not getting an accurate look at what's really going on as our views become further distorted (pg.117).

Rather than paedophilia be seen as solved there seems to be an illusion of effective action taking place against the paedophile due to narrow and one-dimensional views. The societal ideology to demonise and lock up the 'evil' paedophile without sympathy or remorse (because they are both unable to help themselves and unwilling to stop, maybe even enjoy their crimes) (Franklin, 1999, Pg.217) doesn't help

solve/stop/prevent the social issue. A recognising of the problem is taking place but a distorted knowledge and lack of reason means nothing can be resolved.

When this is not the case blame falls to authorial figures (government, social workers), constructed as failing to do their jobs/protect or that they are not one of the community so they can't understand/fix the issue. This construction is also used as a way of evidencing that actions need to be taken.

SIX: The social problem either fade away seeming to be solved, dissipates to later return, or the resolution was unsuccessful and the problem is represented as even worse as before resulting in further coping methods put in place. **Overview:** The model as an overall process:

In both case studies the panics fade to later reoccur. Whereas video nasties news coverage was short lived with the press moving on/losing interest, paedophilia is still a strong focus. Similarly, law/legislation/policymaking is a constant debate when it comes to attempting to 'tackle' paedophilia as is how to deal/treat/stop pedophiles.

Though video nasties are no longer deemed a societal threat other technological 'panics' have arguably replaced it in an ongoing framework of the dangers of media/technology to society (violent video games, the Internet and un-regulation/explicit content, pornography, mobile and social media/loss of human connection). In most of these cases the same childhood focus is a significant factor.

A final criticism of the model is that changes in society and in mass media/technology may have affected its usefulness (McRobbie, Thornton, Sarah L. 1995). Ungar (2001) also suggests the model is outdated as social issues are now more often environmental than moral and stemming from authorities instead of folk devils. Likewise, Furedi (2013) argues the model is too reliant on the idea of 'moral' whereas social issues are now better considered in line with 'risk society'. Here the anticipation of potential catastrophes that are outside of current control (Beck, 2012) and the prevention of societal threats before they take place is alternative way of considering the social issues.

“Modern society has become increasingly occupied with debating, preventing, and managing risk that it itself has produced” - Prof. Dr Ulrich Beck (2012)

Whilst at face value both case studies accurately fit the *processual model* as moral panics, the actual individual underlying issues and factors of both video nasties and paedophilia are very different, as is the context of each case and why they are perceived as societally harmful. The model is unable to account for this due to the narrow considerations of applying each fixed stage.

The model is also too simple when it comes to considering the varying outcomes and reactions to a social problem. Both case studies showed reactions by different groups (media, experts, government, pressure groups, public, etc.) for different reasons, receiving varied responses, and resulting in different outcomes.

Adding to this it does not successfully account for, or cover, all the impacts and influences surrounding the concept of social problems. By focusing on the media constructions other influences and primary definers are not accounted for and there is little exploration of why only particular people are able to label something/someone harmful to society. How/why the issues are constructed the ways they are is also not successfully account for, nor it why the coverage impacts the way it does, or why only particular people are deemed experts.

Finally it does not sufficiently explain or give understanding to what underlays the individual social issues and makes them perceived as societally harmful when other, arguably, more pressing problems are ignored.

When all this is considered the model is, like the title quote suggests, too simple in understanding the creation and concepts of social problems. It is instead one of many theories, processes, and aspects that can be used in starting to form the basis of further study.

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