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## **Moral Panics and Social Work: towards a sceptical view of UK child protection**

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## **Moral Panics and Social Work: towards a sceptical view of UK child protection**

### **Abstract**

In this paper we apply the lens of moral panic to analyse child protection social work in the UK. We suggest that many of the anxieties that beset social work are best understood as moral panics and discuss processes in which 'claims-makers' have introduced and amplified concerns into panics. We discuss two examples of anxieties over child endangerment: the first is concerned with the foundation of the NSPCC and its campaign for the Children's Charter of 1889. The second is the contemporary 21st century anxiety over children and young people's use of the Internet, exemplified in the activities of the Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre (CEOP) and their 'Children and Young Persons' Global Online Charter'.

### **Key Words**

**child protection, moral panics, social work**

## **Introduction**

Children and families social work is prone to periodic involvement in scares and moral panics: the Munchausen by proxy syndrome of the 1970s (Alison and Roberts, 1998), glue-sniffing in the 1980s (Jagger, 1997), satanic abuse in the 1990s (Clapton, 1993) and more recently, childhood obesity (Templeton, 2007). In this paper, we focus on what we believe are two clear examples of children and family social work's engagement with, and participation in, moral panics. The first examines the early foundations of modern social work in the 19th century and the role of child protection agencies in this, principally, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). The second concerns a 21st century child protection anxiety, the Internet and child sexual abuse, where attention is given to the activities of contemporary child protection agencies, especially the Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre (CEOP) which describes itself as the UK's national centre for child protection (CEOP, January 2011) and has been referred to by a Government Minister as 'a centre of excellence in protecting children online that the UK can be proud of' (CEOP Annual Review, 2010: 5).

## **Moral Panics**

Stanley Cohen's (1972) work on moral panics has been highly influential in our application of what we believe is an overdue scepticism relating to social work's concerns and activities. In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen (1972) examines incidents of widespread social alarm from the 1950s and 1960s in relation to a variety of nation-wide issues that temporarily gripped the public imagination. These issues included the rise of Rock 'n' Roll, the depiction of sex in the cinema and, most famously, the Mods and Rockers disturbances of the early 1960s. Cohen argued that issues came about and were amplified by media attention with the co-operation of what he termed 'moral guardians of society'. In his example of the Mods and Rockers, Cohen argued that a combination of moral outrage and substantial press coverage lead to widespread alarm and panic during which politicians became involved, the behaviour of culprits ('folk devils', in this case Mods and Rockers) became a matter for national concern and police and magistrates 'got tough'. Cohen

points out that an additional consequence of a moral panic can often be repressive legislation.

The most frequently used definition of a moral panic is taken from the opening paragraph of his book:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk-lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long - lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (Cohen, 1972: 9)

Cohen has taken pains to point out that ‘The argument is not that there is ‘nothing there’ ...but that the reaction to what is observed or inferred is fundamentally inappropriate’ (2002: 172). In other words there is ‘disproportionality’: a sense that a more sizable number of individuals are engaged in the behaviour in question than is actually the case (Goode and Ben Yehuda, 1994: 36). Goode and Ben-Yehuda have developed moral panic theory and argue that moral panics take many forms; their evolution varies greatly according to context, ranging from those with lasting consequences to those of a more fleeting nature. They suggest the following criteria need to be satisfied in order for an episode to be classified as a moral panic:

1. Volatility: there is public expression of concern as evinced via the media but it is mercurial and capable of subsiding very suddenly;

2. Hostility: in the course of an eruption of media concern, 'folk devils' are identified and endure intense scrutiny. They are cast as outsiders, enemies of society, and deserving of harsh punishment;
3. Measurable concern: The extent of public concern must be considerable and measurable through opinion polls, frequency of contributions in the media, etc;
4. Consensus: There is broad social and political unity that the grounds for concern are significant and that action must be taken;
5. Disproportionality: In the circumstances of moral panic, the measures instituted to address the problem are exaggerated and out of proportion to the magnitude of the threat posed. (1994: 33–39)

Garland suggests another two factors that define a moral panic. These are:

- (i) that there is a *moral dimension* to the social reaction, particularly the introspective soul-searching that accompanies these episodes;
- (ii) and the idea that the deviant conduct in question is somehow *symptomatic*, e.g. of a wider malaise. (2008: 11)

Cohen's definition and Garland's emphasis on the moral dimension provide a starting point for recognition of a moral panic and Goode and Ben Yehuda's criteria clarify the constituent elements of one. Goode and Ben-Yehuda also helpfully suggest three possible sources of a moral panic. These are: the more or less conscious machinations of the state in seeking to assert control; a more spontaneous outpouring of public anxiety; and the activities, some more witting than others, of 'interest groups' that draw attention to their various concerns (1994: 124–143). The notion of 'interest group' as source of moral panic is of special interest here. In his work, Cohen draws attention to a collection of interested parties whom he describes as 'moral entrepreneurs', such as charities, rights groups, local councillors, religious leaders and states that that any change in social policy or legislation following a moral panic is likely to be consistent with the moral entrepreneurs' definition of the problem. Goode and Ben Yehuda suggest that Cohen's moral entrepreneurs belong in their interest group model, with the moral panic explained as the unintended outcome of moralizing

projects undertaken by such interest groups in an effort to draw public attention to a specific ‘moral evil’. In his analysis of the UK satanic abuse controversy of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Jenkins (1992) employs the phrase ‘claims-makers’ for those who involve themselves in the kind of moralizing projects, campaigns and crusades that contribute to the genesis of a moral panic.

In their wide-reaching and authoritative account of how social welfare tragedies become public scandals, Butler and Drakeford (2005), discuss the activities of claims-makers and make the point that ‘Scandal begins with ‘discovery’ and the preparedness of a claims-maker to pursue the matter’ (205). We concur and in many cases, Butler and Drakeford’s ‘scandal’ could be interchanged with our notion of moral panic. However, we suggest that three significant differences between ‘scandal’ as conceived by Butler and Drakeford and our conception of moral panic. Firstly, scandal does not carry with it the explicit moralism of moral panics in which child protection has been both subject and midwife. Secondly (unlike the scandals surrounding individual places and events to which Butler and Drakeford refer, e.g. the mistreatment of patients in Ely Hospital, The ‘Pindown’ practices in Staffordshire in the late 1980s and the murder of Jonathan Zito by mentally ill, Christopher Clunis), child protection moral panics have focussed on sets of behaviours by, in Cohen’s words ‘folk devils’ (parents, paedophiles, Satanists). Thirdly, Butler and Drakeford suggest that scandal’s primary claims- makers come from outside:

‘Primary claims-makers in social welfare...share one key characteristic. They are always outsiders, either in the sense of bringing a fresh eye to circumstances where general sensibilities have been blunted or in the sense of being part of a group who do not have a place on the dominant policy agenda. (226 – 227)

Whereas, as we will argue, many of child protection’s panics e.g. satanic abuse, childhood obesity, internet usage by children and young people are generated from **within** by child protection agencies.

We now turn to how our definition, criteria and possible sources of a moral panic fit with the history of social work and its contemporary concerns.



## **Social Work, Child Protection and Moral Panics**

Cohen's model suggests that moral panics are impermanent, precarious episodes that erupt into society's collective conscious and then disappear. However some concerns do not disappear. Pearson (1983) explains how anxieties over juvenile delinquency have been a permanent feature of British society over several hundred years. In relation to paedophilia, Jewkes argues that 'Even the current state of heightened anxiety over paedophiles appears to have been sustained for the best part of a decade' (2004: 76). The most persistent of anxieties seem to be those concerning children (Gittins, 1998). These have reached a new peak in relation to the Internet but before we broach the subject of the Internet however, a close and critical reading of the foundations of social work indicates that a tendency to both react to and participate in moral panics is a persistent feature of social work but especially child protection.

The roots of modern children and family social work lie in the last half of the nineteenth century (Cree, 1995). Then, a number of child welfare agencies were established, including Dr. Barnardo's (1870), The Waifs and Strays Society (1882, which became the Children's Society), and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (1884). The NSPCC in particular was active in establishing and delivering a child protection service which has provided a key template for modern children and families work (Behlmer, 1982; Clapton, 2009; Ferguson, 2004). Abrams argues that:

The history of child abuse, then, is essentially a history of public awareness of the phenomenon focussing on two distinct periods. The first period coincides with the founding of the NSPCC in England and the SNPCC in Scotland in the 1880s. (1998: 203)

It has been suggested that the values of the NSPCC became embedded in the DNA of contemporary social work (Clapton, 2009). If this is the case then a close look at some of the early concerns of the NSPCC is helpful in establishing a link between early anxieties and some of the more contemporary issues that appear to trouble child protection work.

## **Shock and Exaggeration: the birth of the NSPCC and the campaign for the ‘Children’s Charter’ of 1889**

Victorian society was often gripped by panics involving morals, usually focussing on women and children. Many philanthropist and welfare agencies were active in fostering alarm over parental neglect and child impoverishment. Dr. Barnardo, for instance, went to great lengths to exhibit ‘before and after’ photographs of children who came into his shelters, a number of which were falsified for more dramatic publicity (McHoul, 1991, Butler and Drakeford, 2005). The prose of the children’s charities during this period was prurient, sentimental and purple. One Edinburgh child welfare shelter spoke of children who ‘fled for refuge, mere children flushed, panting, terrified, as if the Destroyer were at their heels’ (Annual Report of The Edinburgh Children’s Aid and Refuge, 1886: 12). Reading the literature of this period, it seems that no urchin was left unwashed (or unclothed then re clothed) when it was felt that the extent of child misery warranted shock tactics. Such tactics involved lurid descriptions of child imperilment in dens of iniquity and vice, with the sexual element stressed to prick (and pique) the consciences of middle class Britain. There are ‘grisly tales of suffering’ and ‘illustrations of parental inhumanity’ (Behlmer, 1982: 70), much hinting at sexual crimes in ‘atmospheres of moral impurity in dim attics and damp cellars’ (Platt, 1969: 41) and in the push to create a public demand for legislation, the deployment of what Behlmer describes as the ‘politics of pathos’ (1982: 3). A particular obsession with child prostitution was whipped into a frenzy via popular London newspapers of the time such as *The Pall Mall Gazette* and its claims of a white slave trade. This reached its peak in 1885, resulting in the Criminal Law Amendment Act which raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen, strengthened existing legislation against prostitution and proscribed all homosexual relations.

The foundations of the NSPCC lie in the establishment of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1874 in New York, USA following the widely publicized case of Mary Ellen Wilson, a nine-year-old girl who had been severely mistreated by her foster mother. The case for the UK foundation of the NSPCC was made via *The Liverpool Telegraph* in 1883 by a local businessman who had been swayed by the Reverend Silas Hocking’s million-selling, sentimental pot-

boiler involving Liverpool street urchins and the redemptive power of religion, *Her Benny* (1879).

In an early example of the interconnection of child protection, the media and shock tactics, the months preceding the foundation of the London branch of the NSPCC in 1884, saw *The Times* pay ‘unusually close attention to incidents of child abuse’ (Behlmer, 1982: 56) and it was through its letters’ pages that momentum grew to emulate the Liverpool initiative. At the founding meeting of the London NSPCC, the need was described as overwhelming and urgent action was necessary: ‘The child Lazarus lies at our gate full of sores: only while we linger they perish’ (Housden, 1955: 21). These sentiments were duly repeated in the media of the day.

Once established, the London Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children soon became the national centre for an expanding network of similar societies. In the five years between the foundations of the NSPCC in 1884 and its first claim to legislative success, The Children’s Charter of 1889, the NSPCC was indefatigable in its pursuit of public attention to the conditions of children. The Society’s descriptions of horrific cases drawn from its ‘army of facts’ (Behlmer, 1982: 101) were often exaggerated (Rose, 1991: 241) and ‘perforce crude’, not least because at that time the Society had only one Inspector to patrol a London population of four million (Behlmer, 1982: 71). In 1888, the Secretary of the Society claimed that in London a thousand children were murdered by unscrupulous parents every winter so as to qualify for the death benefit afforded by a life insurance policy taken out on the child. The claim was subsequently amended to ‘impressions’ of the number of children involved rather than fact (Behlmer, 1982: 128). Behlmer also draws attention to media embellishments such as claims of a ‘slaughter of the innocents’ (17). The media was fed by the NSPCC’s ‘wrenching propaganda which dramatised the defencelessness of the young’ (78) in, for instance, its 1886 tract *The Child of the English Savage*, which was full of horrific accounts of sadism towards children (Rose, 1991) and the ‘quite sensational case studies’ recounted in the NSPCC’s regular publication, *The Child’s Guardian*, (Flegel, 2009: 21). Newspapers such as *The Times* thundered against ‘an evil existing which urgently calls for a remedy’, (Behlmer, 1982: 109), and the resultant popular and political outrage was instrumental in the successful passage of

the Prevention of Cruelty to, and Protection of, Children Act 1889, the Children's Charter.

Underpinning everything the NSPCC did was a deep belief that children's moral and spiritual health were being corrupted by their parents' behaviour:

The Society has set itself to raise the standard of home-life amongst the depraved, degraded and the cruel, and to teach neglectful parents that they are the guardians of their children, and that by neglecting and ill-treating them they are not only breaking the law of God but the law of the land. (NSPCC, Scottish Branch, 1901)

It is difficult to locate alternative narratives to the predominantly laudatory histories of these foundations of modern children and family work (Ashley, 1985; Housden, 1955). However, one of the few dissenting voices is Abrams and she re-interprets one 1880s alarm over 'baby-farming' as an overreaction to the fairly common practice of wet-nursing where other women breast-fed the babies of working mothers. Ever-ready to feed a scandal-hungry readership, the development of a child protection movement that could go out to provide the detail was manna to newspaper editors, as was the public furore that followed. Newspaper descriptions and illustrations of slatterns killing off babes was sufficient to raise a temporary hue and cry about the need for better child protection. Abrams remarks that both the press and the NSPCC periodically stoked public interest in the subject, but that what was at issue in the so-called baby-farming controversy was the fact that mothers were 'desperate, not immoral and unnatural' (1998: 218).

In his critical analysis of the birth of the NSPCC, Behlmer concludes that:

There can be no denying that the NSPCC excelled at its speciality, the orchestration of public concern for the physical well-being of the young. But throughout the early and middle 1890s the society overextended itself. As the shapers of late Victorian England's most arresting moral reform, NSPCC zealots lapsed into the practice of condemning without adequate proof. (1982:159)

Were the exaggerations of the NSPCC justified? Were brutal parents brutalising their children on the scale claimed? Were drunken mothers suffocating thousands of babies? Was a child protection movement with all its attendant personalities, experts, inspectors, policies and legislation necessary? These are difficult questions to answer and throughout the literature on moral panics, the question of what *degree* of anxiety constitutes a moral panic crops up regularly (Garland, 2008; Paterson and Stark, 2001). As Garland notes:

...disputes here tend to be intractable because the thing being measured is usually not just actual conduct (How many muggings? How many rioters? How much damage?) but also the size of a potential threat and a perceived moral endangerment. (2008: 21–22)

In the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th, poverty, ill-health and access to education were huge problems for British working-class families (Hobsbawm, 1987). Did the claims of child protection agencies like the NSPCC overshadow and divert attention away from such conditions? If so, then Cohen's idea of the consequence of moral panics may be accurate in that during a moral panic 'we are manipulated into taking some things too seriously and other things not seriously enough' (2002: xxxv).

Are there any contemporary comparisons? Honore argues that 'children are already the target of more adult anxiety and intervention than at any time in history (2008: 4). We suggest that today such anxieties are seen most in relief in relation to the dangers of the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people, especially involving their use of the Internet, and that significant parallels can be drawn with the 19th century activities of child protection agencies.

However, before we discuss social work's anxieties relating to sexual abuse and the Internet, we feel it necessary to raise some questions about the wider issue of social work and the sexual abuse of children and young people.

## Child sexual abuse – how big a cause for concern?

Parton (1985) has suggested that, taken in a global, political and cultural context, child abuse prevention as practised in the UK may be regarded as driven by something of a moral panic; i.e. that compared to poverty, hunger and other forms of child impoverishment such as low or non-existent educational opportunities, social work concerns over child abuse are disproportionate. Can widespread social work concerns about the frequency and prevalence of child *sexual* abuse be regarded in the same way?

Twenty years ago, Hacking, in a claim echoed by others (e.g. Clapton and Mellon, 1991), noted that: ‘the present primary connotation of child abuse is child sexual abuse’ (1991: 259). Since then, public expressions of concern have erupted periodically, usually regarding new forms of sexual abuse, e.g. satanic abuse, or ways this can occur such as grooming by those labelled as paedophiles. Hacking argues that attempts to *quantify* child sexual abuse fail to measure up to philosophical standards of whether a concept is well-understood: for it to be so requires that it is amenable to the question ‘How many?’, yet efforts to quantify child sexual abuse are ‘amazingly discrepant’ (Hacking, 1992), ranging from 1% (United States Administration for Children & Families, 2005) to 21% (Cawson et al, 2000) and as high as 40% (Bolen, 2001). The knowledge that ‘it is impossible to know the true incidence or prevalence of child sexual abuse in Europe (or anywhere else)’ (Lalor and McElvaney, 2010: 35) has not prevented some writers concluding that ‘child sexual abuse is of epidemic proportions’ (Bolen, 2001: 80). In the absence of vaguely reliable figures, such claims have led to a culture in which social workers operate on assumptions that ‘everyone knows it occurs’ and on a number of critical occasions have been prepared to imagine that the extent of sexual abuse in society is indeed very wide. In this respect then, the events in Cleveland in 1987 and during the so-called satanic abuse controversy of the late 1980s and early 1990s, can be seen not so much as moral panics in themselves as has been claimed (Soothill and Francis, 2002), but perhaps as expressions of a readiness to believe exaggerated claims of sexual abuse and may be indicative of what we believe, is a permanent state of readiness to panic – and a readiness to intervene, often to the detriment of the lives of children and families.

## **Children, Safety and the Internet**

### ***The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre – a safeguarder for the 21st century or ‘claims-maker’?***

If it is accurate as Buckingham observes, that a wider, present day discourse on childhood and welfare has become ‘invested with a growing sense of anxiety and panic’ (2000: 3), then it is perhaps no surprise that a particularly feverish child protection moral panic may be playing out in the 21st century in relation to the moral dangers posed children and young people by their use of the Internet.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing but twenty-five years from now, what will be thought of current social work anxieties over the sexual endangerment of children and young people via the Internet? It seems to us that the combination of such anxiety and the Internet has produced the elements of a perfect moral panic for our times. And, as we shall see, these elements include the activity of a prominent child protection agency whose claims and activities have fuelled public concerns in a close parallel to the activities of the NSPCC and others in the nineteenth century.

‘Stranger danger’ has always been a public anxiety, despite the low incidence of child abduction and sexual abuse by strangers. In the 1950s, children were warned never to take sweets from a stranger and this took on a quasi-official status and even found its way into films of the time. That taking such sweets could lead to abduction was not generally well understood by children who would refuse a toffee offered by an old lady on the bus. Now research has told us often enough that the main source of sexual harm to children will come from people that they know (Finkelhor, 2009). However, the evil bogeyman remains a powerful source of moral panic and today, instead of lurking in bushes, he hides out on the Internet (‘for a month officers tried without success to hack into his online lair’, Townsend, 2007).

And it is the fertile ground of Internet concerns from which the most recent and high-profile agency for the protection of children has emerged. Describing itself as the UK’s national centre for child protection (13 January 2011), the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) was established in 2006 by the UK Government, at the instigation of leading children's charities including NSPCC. Its

key objectives are to: 'identify, locate and protect children and young people from sexual exploitation and online abuse in the UK and globally; engage and empower children, young people and parents through information and education and provide specialist information and support to child protection industry and professionals' (CEOP, 2011c). Its 2009-10 Annual Review describes the CEOP as representing 'a step-change in law enforcement: never before had police officers, child protection specialists, educators, representatives from industry, charity and government been brought together under one roof with the single aim of protecting children' (CEOP, 2010). The CEOP's partners include many of the UK's leading child protection agencies such as Barnardo's and the NSPCC. Interestingly, in terms of the continuing influence of the NSPCC, the CEOP depends upon it for its specialist advice:

The role of the NSPCC child protection advisors within CEOP is crucial in that they advise all faculties within CEOP, supporting operational decision-making, identifying children at risk and influencing the process and planning around how children are removed from immediate harm as well as how they are safeguarded and supported in the longer term. (CEOP, 2010: 21)

Despite the fact that the CEOP is a government agency its operational relationship with the NSPCC places it within the nexus of children's charities activities. In claims remarkably akin to those issued by the 19th century child protection charities and expanded upon in the media then, the CEOP has entered the field as a safe-guarding and protective agency against the on-line threat to the safety of children and young people. CEOP spokespersons' views are regularly quoted. The 'internet is a public place where dangers lurk' (Sweeny, 2006) and 'we are shining light into those dark places' (Taylor, 2011). Further claims concern the degree and extent of danger posed:

Ian Robertson, from Britain's Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, is unequivocal about the danger facing society. 'This (internet-based child abuse) is the biggest challenge facing modern policing to date. Somehow we have to keep up with the internet,' he says. 'Previously such surveillance techniques had been reserved for fighting terrorism and organised crime. Paedophilia, detectives have decided, now merits equal resources. (Townsend, 2007)



An information leaflet explaining the work of CEOP is hard-hitting: ‘Child sexual abuse is one of the most horrific crimes, if not the worst. It attacks the most vulnerable people in our society, affects victims for life and rips away significant chunks from their most formative years’. The message is clear that despite the variations in definition of what constitutes sexual abuse which range from undefined inappropriate touch to rape (Lalor and McElvaney, 2010) CEOP has chosen the most extreme end of the spectrum. The battle lines are drawn: the threat of child sexual abuse is ‘horrendous’ and ‘we ignore this threat at our peril’. The leaflet goes on to describe the CEOP as part of ‘an international alliance of law enforcement agencies working together to fight paedophiles online’ (*Information Leaflet*, undated). CEOP press releases continue the theme of struggle (‘The battle is far from over’, 2011b). Battle, horror, peril and fight. This is the language of a crusade. Do the numbers at risk justify this?:

With the true scale of paedophilia in Britain impossible to quantify, Jim Warnock, head of operations at the CEOP, said hundreds of online paedophile networks had yet to be uncovered and that such was the size of the problem that as many as one in six children - 1.9 million - might be a victim of abuse. (Townsend, 2008)

When the CEOP tells us that they have 'safeguarded' 414 children from sexual abuse (CEOP, 2011c) we welcome this but need to ask how is the count of ‘414 safeguarded children’ made? Furthermore, what is meant by ‘safeguarded and protected’? From whom were these children protected? From themselves? From family members? From adult paedophiles? From other under-18s? The proportion of threats to the welfare of these children that were Internet-based as distinct from other risk sources is also unclear. In relation to the arrests of ‘513 suspects’, again it is not clear for what crime these people have been arrested (CEOP, 2011c). We are not told how many were subsequently charged and if so with what crime. Nor are there details of any subsequent proceedings and the numbers found innocent or guilty. Such questions have previously been posed to the CEOP:

131 children saved in a year is a laudable number, how ever you look at it.

But something struck me as a little fuzzy about the figures: 297 arrests, they said. Well, that's fine - but we all know that *arrests* are not the same as *convictions*. So how many people have actually been charged or investigated as a result of Ceop's work?

That information wasn't so forthcoming. When I spoke to Ceop this afternoon, a spokesman said that the organisation didn't actually know how many of those arrests had resulted in legal action. (Johnson, 2008)

Such questioning may seem off-limits and tantamount to the denial of the existence of Internet-based child sexual abuse. The charge of denial is a powerful one which can be used to prevent critical enquiry. In defence of scepticism, Furedi argues that 'The act of raising questions about a 'warning' is now discussed as an insidious deed of denial' with the charge of denial used as a synonym for refusing to acknowledge the truth and a device to impute the motives of those identified as 'deniers'. Furedi goes on to point out that during the satanic abuse scare in USA and the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s, denial was regarded as one of the main barriers to tackling the alleged abuse, with claims-makers about satanic abuse arguing that denial of its existence was the moral equivalent of such abuse itself. (Furedi, 2008).

Unless claims of the degree of threat posed to children and young people by the Internet can be questioned we are unable to judge the *proportions* of the threat – and the time and money spent on such activity.

In an uncanny echo of the Children's Charter of 1889, one hundred and twenty years later the CEOP launched 'The Children and Young Persons' Global Online Charter' (CEOP, 2009). The new Charter is all about safety and sets the bar high for child protection agencies: 'the online and offline worlds have converged into one common space where children and young people have a right to be protected and kept safe from harm from those who would seek to abuse their trust'. The Charter calls for 'a mandatory and universal browser-based mechanism that should be embedded on the toolbar of all social networking sites so that threatening behaviour can be reported in just two clicks without even leaving the webpage'. Such calls have pressed the social media website Facebook, despite the site already having a 'block' button, into installing a panic button facility that will allow the user to be put through to – not

their parents or other guardians but – the CEOP. This assumption of responsibility is echoed in ‘Clare thought she knew’, a CEOP film in which a young girl’s encounter with an online predator is depicted ending with her saying “It’s best to tell someone, someone who will make it stop” with the next image being that of her hitting the CEOP panic button [[www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrQ6eu\\_OTi4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrQ6eu_OTi4)].

### ***Claims-making and Proportionality***

In 2008, a Harvard University literature review called into question warnings regarding the scale of the Internet-based threat to children and young people and labelled these ‘extremely exaggerated’ (The Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2008, Appendix C: 15). The ISTTF study reviewed existing studies of Internet usage and sexual offending arising from online contacts and cites one survey in which only ‘two youths out of 1,500 (one 15-year-old girl and one 16-year-old girl) surveyed reported an offline sexual assault which had resulted from online solicitation’ (ibid.: 18).

According to the ISTTF, often the victims of sexual abuse that began online, while undoubtedly highly vulnerable, are typically teenagers who have actively engaged in risk-taking behaviour online and are deliberately arranging to meet with adult partners, knowing that sexual activity would be part of the purpose of the meeting. From this the ISTTF conclude that the commonly projected picture of older adult men ‘grooming’ prepubescent girls or arranging meetings with teenagers for their sexual exploitation is too simplistic. The ISTTF report cites a study that states that in only 5% of the cases where men were arrested after meeting a young victim online had the victim been ‘deceived by offenders claiming to be teens or lying about their sexual intentions’ (2008, Appendix C: 16).

Time will tell whether the CEOP’s claims are proportionate to the purported threat, however Goode and Ben Yehuda’s notion of disproportionality is worth recalling here. Although writing before the rise of mass use of the Internet, their definition of disproportion seems particularly apt: It is ‘a *sense* that a more sizable number of individuals are engaged in the behaviour in question than actually are’ (1994: 36). One thing is certain. New claims will continue and media headlines will continue to fan alarm and panic. A previous case involving babies and the Internet has come and

gone ('Babies are new target, Met warns as paedophile threat spirals', *The Observer*, 24 August 2008), at the time of writing we are in the middle of another panic involving child trafficking. Whatever combination of alarm, claims-making and media flame-fanning comes next we can be sure it will concern more evil and depraved abuse than the previous. More than ten years ago Chris Morris satirised the moral panic over children's Internet endangerment by inventing some of the most ludicrous claims ever ('internet paedophiles can make computer keyboards emit noxious fumes to subdue children', Brass Eye TV Special "Paedogeddon!", 26 July 2001). The fact that these were believed by many of the celebrities who appeared on the show was indicative then of the height of the moral panic over children and the Internet. However, the extent of Morris' subsequent vilification may have also been a warning to sceptics. And, when a repeat was planned, the NSPCC did not see the satirical side and called for the programme to be banned (*The Guardian*, 27 July, 2001).

Claims about the dangers of the Internet have been described as promoting a 'culture of fear... around the online environment' (Palfrey and Gasser, 2009: 18). If the NSPCC indulged in 'the politics of pathos' in the 19th century, does the CEOP, with its talk of peril and horror and suggestions of millions of children at risk, similarly indulge in the politics of panic? As indicated by their endorsement of and co-operation with the CEOP, leading child welfare and protection agencies seem to us to be associated with such alarm-making.

We now turn to some reasons why child protection social work is associated with moral panics. A key one of these is social work's connection with moralising.

### **Social Work, Child Protection and Moralism**

Child protection and morals have always been intertwined. Writing of the mental health profession, Morrall suggests that 'moral panics serve as an ideological conduit giving notice of what behaviours will and will not be tolerated' (2000: 122) Social work's roots in moral righteousness concerning the way that parents and children ought to behave mean that its DNA carries a moralising and zealous tendency that, on notable occasions, has blown anxieties and concerns about children into moral panics.

Reviewing work on moral panics, Jock Young, among the first of those to advance the framework of moral panic to explain periodic outbreaks of widespread anxiety, suggested that:

If panics are ‘successful’, they connect up to fundamental shifts in the tectonic plates of order, each occurrence like a volcanic atoll. It is their reappearance that confirms their status as moral disturbances of any significant order.

(Young, 2009: 11)

Applied to child protection panics, Young’s notion of ‘volcanic atolls’ suggests a lengthy continuity of a deep normalising belief in social work of a right way to behave and a wrong way - what will be tolerated and what will not.

A move can be charted from 19th century anxiety and moral panics over cruelty and neglect by feckless parents to a more focussed but widespread anxiety today that more often than not is about child endangerment and is one that bubbles below the surface and emerges every so often with deleterious effects for parents and children (as in the events in 1987 in Cleveland and three years later in Orkney). An underlying ideology imbued with what seems to be quasi-religiosity derived from social work’s roots in moralism and rescue, especially around saving children from evil, may also be detected. The 21st century moral code no longer stresses ‘goodness’ or Godliness. What has now displaced the concerns of the early founders of social work is a language of safety, risk and protection, according to which all manner of parental activity can be classified as high, medium or low risk. However, whilst the language may have altered we find a recurrence of anxieties and fears regarding standards of parenting and ‘appropriateness’ of behaviour of children and young people, across range of parental commission (childhood obesity) or omission (failure to supervise Internet use). Such anxieties and fears, the seedbeds of panic, are primarily activated by individual and agencies within child protection such as Barnardo’s with its claims of an ‘alarming increase in childhood obesity’ and an ‘obesity epidemic’ (2004), or the more recent drive to make what is termed ‘the commercial exploitation of children’ a new form of abuse (Wild, 2012).

Aside from the trappings of late modernity, we could be back in the late nineteenth century with anxieties and panics over parental morals and behaviour. Despite claims

to a secular rationalism, which renders the moralizing element of social work less explicit but no less pernicious, moralism remains as powerful a motivator as ever. And although implicit, sexual abuse is often connoted as part of a wider problem, one of the morals of feckless parents who neglect to protect and the immorality of sexual abusers.

Ultimately, as before, the moral guardians, have to step in to fill the vacuum left by parental neglect and fight immorality. Rather than the easy target of the paedophile as folk devil, perhaps the actual target has not altered. In the 19th century, if depraved parents couldn't protect children then the burden was shouldered by the NSPCC and its Inspectors patrolled the slums and alleys of Liverpool, London and Glasgow. Today, in a world in which the caring capacity of parents is often depicted as ambiguous: 'Mothers who tell children never to accept sweets from strangers happily grant them unsupervised access to the web' (Townsend, 2007) and the word 'parent' is referred to once in the 2010-2011 CEOP Annual Review (2011c), instead of parents overseeing their children's behaviour, the CEOP patrols the highways and byways of the Internet with its Panic Buttons that will signal a call for child rescue.

### **Child Protection and the Battle for Resources**

Garland suggests that: 'At bottom, the sociology of moral panics discovers the displaced politics of group relations and status competition' (2008: 11). In his sceptical account of the development of what he terms 'the child abuse movement' in the USA, Hacking (1991) discusses the advent of the concept of child abuse and draws attention to a burgeoning category which includes 'some things that were not even counted as especially bad three decades ago' (257), noting that 'no one had any glimmering, in 1960, of what was going to count as child abuse in 1990' (257). In a passage regarding the activities of what we would describe as claims-makers, he points to the latter's success in inculcating a sense of national emergency: '...the feeling of emergency was there. But it was exuberant. New methods, new agencies, new laws, new education of children, new information for parents, new therapies...' (258). Hacking queries the apparent doubling of child abuse cases and then the

earnestness (and relish) of both the claims-makers and social workers in the face of such pressures: 'If only we had more people, more time!' (1991: 258).

Today this call for more resources is echoed by the CEOP whose Chief Executive 'admitted there was now a need for the government to wake up to the scale of the problem. Gamble asked: 'Do I need more people? Yes, of course I do.' (Doward, 2007).

Jenkins, writing of the UK events of Cleveland and the satanic abuse scares, is blunt:

A child abuse crisis...led to perceptions of a major problem requiring the urgent allocation of new resources: a larger and more specialized child protection establishment would mean more investigation and detection and thus more concern. (1992: 140)

The ability to capture the attention of both the Government and the public in the scramble for resources is now a central occupation as witnessed by the fund-raising campaigns of the large UK child protection charities. Charities' survival depends on winning recognition and consequent income from their fundraising campaigns. Children's charities compete with each other for donations from both the general public and from business world. Each has to demonstrate their unique worth in saving children from an ever increasing range of perils. We believe that one consequence of the competition for child protection resources is the creation of anxieties and alarmism, the seed bed for moral panics.

## **Conclusion**

The consequences of social work moral panics further embed a culture of surveillance and control and the growth of systems and processes that have little or no effect on the welfare and lives of children and families. In fact child protection policies are increasingly recognised as often doing more harm than good (Lonne et al, 2009). A child protection industry has emerged, one function of which is that of 'moral entrepreneur' and 'claims maker'. This industry not only maintains public attention

and alarm regarding what it professes to be existing perils, but also acts to highlight seemingly new ways that children might be in danger and therefore competes for new resources to fund vigilance and surveillance. A major consequence of such a process could be, we repeat in Cohen's phrase, that we have been 'taking some things too seriously and other things not seriously enough' (2002: xxxv). Such other things might be the negative consequences for children and families of poverty, ill-health and access to education, that is, issues of social class and inequality. A silence on these welfare matters contrasts with the noise of the moral panics and the flow of resources elsewhere, towards a never-encompassing but ever-extending 'child protection radar'. Focussing on identifying and hunting down demons, real or imaginary, at the expense of any more critical or structural understanding of social work as an agent of social change and social justice, strips out the 'social' from social work. Furthermore, we believe that social work will not come of age until it increases its powers of doubt, curiosity and self-analysis.



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