Moral panics

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The term "moral panics" (MPs) first appeared as an academic term at the beginning of the 1970s, in the well-established field of sociology of deviance and labeling, along with the emerging sociology of mass media. It was the pioneering studies of Jock Young (1971), on the social meaning of drug use, and of Stanley Cohen (1972), on the media-inspired confrontations between youths, which developed and effectively launched the concept of MPs to its present status as a central tool of sociological and media analysis, as well as a common phrase in popular discourse. Since then, the conceptualization of moral panics has benefited from several theoretical innovations. The original model drew mainly on symbolic interaction and labeling theory in relation to deviant behavior, but also on other theories, such as those interrogating collective behavior, social problems, and social movements. Ironically, the success of the concept has also resulted in loose or outdated theoretical applications (McRobbie & Thornton 1995; Cornwell & Linders 2002; Garland 2008) and increased questions about its efficacy (Ungar 2001; Hier 2008). However, the concept and theory of MPs retain all their pertinence and still offer us a heuristic analytical tool by which to study social movements.

DEFINITION

MPs are classically defined as struggles for moral hegemony over interpretations of the legitimacy (or not) of prevailing social arrangements and material interests. They are moral disturbances centering on claims by moral entrepreneurs that direct interests have been violated, sometimes expressed in terms of demonization of "moral deviants" (Victor 1998), sometimes with humanitarian undertones (Becker 1963), that are "wildly exaggerated and wrongly directed" (Jenkins 1998: 7). Indeed, MPs have to create, focus on, and sustain powerfully persuasive images of "folk devils" (Cohen 1972) that can serve as the heart of moral fears. These fears are seen as grossly disproportionate to the event or the activities of the individuals concerned (Hall et al. 1978; Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994). As Cohen states it, 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 stylized 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 (Cohen 1972: 1).

MORAL PANICS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In his foundational book, Cohen studied official and public reaction to conflicts between rival youth subcultures – the "mods" (for modern styles), who drove scooters, against the "rockers," who rode motorcycles and wore leather – which gave way to street fights and property destruction after their unanticipated arrival in an English beach town. In the same vein as Young, Cohen identifies five categories of groups as being part of the collective process of MPs: control agents, politicians, lawmakers, moral entrepreneurs, and the mass media. He builds a five-stage model of MPs: behavior by folk devils is defined as a threat to societal values and interests; the threat is depicted in a recognizable dramatic form by the media; a rapid build-up of public concern

The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements,
Edited by David A. Snow, Donatella della Porta, Bert Klandermans, and Doug McAdam.

DOI: 10.1002/9781405198431.wbespm343

arises; public authorities, politicians, and moral entrepreneurs call for a strong solution to the problem; the panic recedes or results in social and institutional changes.

Hall and colleagues (1978) expanded upon Cohen's concept of MPs by explicating the role of ideology in the media's contribution to the process of a MP, particularly during times of political or socioeconomic crisis. Using Gramsci's concept of hegemony and the signification of "common sense," Hall and his colleagues contend that "the media tend to reproduce the definitions of the powerful" (1978: 57) while maintaining relative autonomy. They state that MPs are intentionally created to draw the public attention away from social and economic troubles and toward the particular subject of the MP for increased forms of social control.

These early English theorists were precursors to the social constructionist perspective, which does not take reality as a given, but as something that is produced by the actions of individuals and groups and their interpretations of how the world works. Critcher (2003) contrasts this British "attributional" model (i.e., defining MPs by their attributes) with an American "processual" model (i.e., defining MPs by the processes through which they pass). Indeed, American studies are particularly insightful in their analyses of the role of moral entrepreneurs and claim makers, therefore of organized collective interests and social movements.

For example, Goode and Ben-Yehuda explicitly incorporate the concept into the field of social movements. Social movements are defined as organized efforts by a substantial number of people to change or resist change in some important aspect of society, and their principal aim is to establish the legitimacy of a specific claim about a social condition. (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994: 116). Social movements are distinguished from pressure groups or lobbies on the grounds that they are mainly composed of outsiders without direct access to policymakers and legislators, and that their statements do not receive automatic attention in the media. In order to further their claims they must gain the media's attention and attempt to secure legitimation for their definition of the reality or the condition being addressed. They do this by opposing good versus evil, and using the language of moral indignation. Their focus is on the worst aspects of the condition they are denouncing as if these were typical and representative. The authors assess three competing explanations of MPs: first, a *grassroots model*, that sees the sources of panics in widespread anxieties about real or imagined threats; second, an *elite engineered model*, in which an elite group manipulates a panic over an issue they know to be exaggerated, in order to divert attention away from their own inability or unwillingness to solve social problems. The main concern of a dominant social group (state, institutions, police, social workers) is to have an objective and conscious interest in developing the MP: a *middle level social movements model*. Here, the important trait, in the vein of Gusfield's seminal work on prohibition leagues (1963), is the role of moral entrepreneurs who launch crusades that may become panics.

Subsequent studies of MPs have multiplied exponentially, including AIDS (Watney 1988), drug scares (Armstrong 2007), minority youth violence (Welch, Jenkins, & Harris 1999), child abuse and pedophilia (Jenkins 1998; Whittier 2009), satanism (Victor 1998), school shootings (Burns & Crawford 1999), and obesity (Fraser, Maher, & Wright 2010), among others. Although both the original model of MPs and its successive reformulations are very useful for social sciences, one has to take stock of the criticisms that have been formulated by scholars in the field of social problems, public policy, media, and social movement studies.

REVISIONS AND CRITICISMS

Many grounds for the rejection or revision of the concept of MPs can be cited. Listed below are six main concerns that may help to consider further the strengths and weaknesses of this key concept to the study of social movements. The

first criticisms discussed are easily answered, while the later oppositions raise valid questions against the theory.

Since its inception, the concept of MP has been used as a form of social critique. As Cohen himself observes, panic research has tended to focus on "cases where the moral outrage appears driven by conservative or reactionary forces . . . [where the aim of the research] was to expose social reaction not just as over-reaction . . . [but also as] tendentious (that is, slanted in a particular ideological direction) and . . . as misplaced or displaced (that is, aimed – whether deliberately or thoughtlessly – at a target which was not the 'real' problem)" (Cohen 2002: xxxi). However, things have recently changed and scholars working on topics as diverse as pedophilia (Whittier 2009), health-related problems (Fraser, Maher, & Wright 2010), or flag burning (Welch 2000) have shown that moral campaigns are not intrinsically conservative.

Second, critics such as Whittier argue that MPs approach to social problems is far too close to largely discredited "studies in crowd behavior that falsely suggest that people in groups or crowds adopt irrational behaviors or beliefs in a kind of mass hysteria in which their usual behaviors and norms fall by the wayside under the influence of the group" (2009: 17). Indeed, it is true that some scholars tend to assume too quickly that people are easily swept up in a collective process of media hype and false information and subjected to "conformity pressures that enforce consensual beliefs" (Victor 1998: 560). However, it has also become very clear that the term "panic" is only a metaphor and has nothing to do with physical panics. As Ben-Yehuda states it, "moral panics are not characterized by fright, flight, freezing, stampede or other behaviours associated – most of the time wrongly – with 'panics.' MPs are characterized by speeches, sermons, preaching, negotiations, arguments, debates, legislation, law enforcement priorities, agenda setting and the like, all focused on moral issues" (Ben-Yehuda 2009: 2).

It has also frequently been said that moral panics are volatile phenomena. By their nature, panics would be fleeting and subside as quickly as they erupt. For example, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) consider that the same issue may reoccur but individual panics cannot be sustained for long. Yet, however temporary they may seem, MPs may also pave the way to new institutional arrangements, as well as for long-lasting bureaucratic structures. Furthermore, even if a specific MP does not seem to immediately give way to routinization, its very occurence may leave traces and have long-lasting cognitive effects. This has been illustrated by scholars working on police culture and the criminalization of social movements (Reiter & Fillieule 2006).

Other criticisms refers to the idea that the disproportional reaction to a particular deviance is a key attribute of any MP. As Goode and Ben-Yehuda argue, "the concept of moral panic rests on disproportionality" (1994: 38). It is evident where "public concern is in excess of what is appropriate if concern were directly proportional to objective harm" (1994: 36). A classic example is the 1980s missing children controversy in the US (Best 1990). A national campaign for missing children was boosted by the 1981 murder of a child in Florida whose parents consequently became prominent activists. The campaign claimed that 1.5 million children disappeared or were abducted each year in the US. Two federal laws set up a national system for recording missing persons (1982), and a National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (1984). However, from 1985 onward, attention to the issue declined as the media attacked the credibility of excessive claims. Even if Best's work clearly illustrates the social construction of MPs, measuring the gap between the reality of a problem and its representation is in itself a difficult matter. Indeed, we simply remain "short of some reliable indication of what constitutes a realistic level of concern, anxiety or alarm" (Hier 2008: 178). In her study of child sexual abuse, Whittier (2009) strongly rejects sociological studies that take a social constructionist or social problem

approach to the issue and denies the fact that concern about child molestation run high only as a result of sensationalist media coverage and the claims of self-promoting "experts," rather than as a result of real danger (Victor 1998; Jenkins 2001) She even shows that, in fact, the majority of criminal cases of child molestation are not even mentioned in the news coverage.

Criticisms of disproportionality are closely linked to the idea that the model of MPs is not well suited to fragmented and multicultural societies where experts, media, and the public do not speak with a unified voice**.** Here again, media coverage of child sexual abuse is a good example. In contrast to social constructionist arguments, rather than equating all sexual abuse with ritual abuse, media stories discuss other forms of child molestation, bringing more attention to other forms of abuse such as incest (Whittier 2009). A renewed MPs approach has to recognize that in multicultural societies, morality is constantly contested and negotiated. Moral consensus in such societies is not an issue taken for granted, and MPs may be launched by diverse competing moral entrepreneurs in various social arenas. Therefore, the entire issue of launching MPs within more general processes of moral entrepreneurship, legislation, policing, and regulation has to be reconceptualized. In the same vein, one must admit that the audience does not simply believe and act upon the messages it receives from the media. In this respect, the model allegedly fails to explain the role of the public as media audiences or a body of opinion (McRobbie & Thornton 1995; Cornwell & Linders 2002; de Young 2004).

Finally, and more damagingly for social movement research, classic MPs models tend to erroneously deny agency to "folk devils" themselves (Watney 1988; Cornwell & Linders 2002; de Young 2004). McRobbie and Thornton (1995: 571) convincingly stress the fact that in contemporary societies, stigmatized groups are less marginalized than they once were. "They not only find themselves vociferously and articulately supported in the same mass media that castigates them, but their interests are also defended by their own noches and micro media. So called folk devils now produce ther own media as a counter to what they perceive as the biased media of the mainstream."

Social movement research can help to enrich the MPs model by analysis of the interactions between deviantizers and stigmatizers on one hand, who try to create folk devils, and, on the other, folk devils who attempt the rejection or even reversal of stigmatization, though the latter attempts are not always successful (e.g., Snow & Anderson 1987). At the same time, social movement research could rely more on the theoretical foundations for the theory and concept of MPs, especially labeling theory, which offers powerful instruments to study interactions between stigmatizers and deviantizers and their targets. One of the more interesting questions to ask in this context would be when and why attempts to launch moral panics fail (Jenkins 2009).

SEE ALSO: Crowds (gatherings) and collective behavior (action); Entrepreneurs, movement; Emotion and social movements; Framing and social movements; Identity work processes; Moral shocks/outrage; Temperance movements.

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