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## Sex Crime and the Media: Press Representations in Northern

### **Introduction**

The relationship between media images and popular consciousness is complex and notoriously difficult to unpack (Reiner *et al.*, 2000a; Livingstone, 1996; Sparks, 1992; Cumberbatch, 1989; Young, 1981). Yet, as Miller and Philo (1999) point out, it would be absurd to suggest that there is no relationship at all. Indeed, it has become trite to suggest that the media do more than merely 'reflect' social reality. They can be instrumental in the orchestration of moral panics (Wilczynski, 1999; Thompson, 1998; Maguire, 1997; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Jenkins, 1992; Cohen, 1980), they can be important symbolic mechanisms used in the construction of ideology (Schudson, 2000; Rolston and Miller, 1996; Herman and Chomsky, 1994; Fishman, 1978; Cohen and Young, 1973) and they can inform the political processes aimed at dealing with social crises (Beckett, 1994; Miller, 1993; Hall *et al.*, 1978). In short, how media represent social phenomena is central to how we, as media consumers with limited first hand experience (Young, 1981), make sense of them and their 'place' in our everyday lives (Philo, 1999; Gamson *et al.*, 1992; Sparks, 1992; Ericson *et al.*, 1991; Entman, 1989).

In recent decades, sex crime, in all its myriad forms, has become a staple of media discourse (Thomas, 2000; Kitzinger, 1996; Marsh, 1991; Soothill and Walby, 1991; Smith, 1984; Ditton and Duffy, 1983). At the same time, the problem of sex crime – and

especially the sexual abuse of children – has become a major source of fear and anxiety (Wilson and Silverman, 2002; West, 2000, 1996; Grubin, 1998; Heberton and Thomas, 1997). Media representations of sex crime give important indicators of the nature and extent of the problem, of how we should think and feel about it, of how we should respond to it, and of preventive measures that might be taken to reduce the risk of victimisation. Yet without exception, research exploring the representation of sex crime in popular discourses has evidenced high levels of sensationalism, stereotyping and inaccuracy (see, *inter alia*, Kitzinger, 1999a, 1999b; Howe, 1998; Meyers, 1997; Lees, 1995; Soothill, 1995; Skidmore, 1995; Benedict, 1992; Franklin and Parton, 1991; Soothill and Walby, 1991; Caputi, 1987; Nelson, 1984). In this chapter I want to present an overview of the research literature and then elaborate on some of the key findings of my own research, which explored the construction of sex crime in the Northern Ireland press.

### **Sex(ed) Crime in the Media**

The vast majority of research on the representation of sex crime in the media has focused on the press, the reasons for which are quite straightforward. Press reports are easier to get hold of and to analyse in ‘hard copy’ format than film, television or radio programmes. There are some exceptions (Young, 1998; Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995), but it is safe enough to say that the sociological analysis of sex crime in the media has, in practice, amounted largely to the sociological analysis of sex crime in the press.

Most studies have concentrated either on representations of sexual violence against women (Meyers, 1997; Grover and Soothill, 1995; Lees, 1995; Benedict, 1992;

Soothill and Walby, 1991) or the sexual abuse of children (for an overview see Goddard, 1996). Studies on the former have varied in scope, from considering the representation of specific offences like date rape (Lees, 1995), to rape, sexual assault and sex murder (Soothill, 1995; Jenkins, 1994, 1992; Benedict, 1992; Soothill and Walby, 1991; Cameron and Frazer, 1987), to violence (including sexual violence) against women more generally (Howe, 1999; Meyers, 1998). Images of child sex abuse have been explored in a context of offending in statutory care environments (Franklin and Parton, 1991; Campbell, 1988; Nava, 1988), by members of the clergy (Jenkins, 1996), by predatory strangers (Kitzinger, 1999b; Websdale, 1999; Best, 1990), or across a range of forms (Wilson and Silverman, 2002; Soothill *et al.*, 1998; Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995; Jenkins, 1992). The sexual abuse of children in their own homes tends to be discussed in terms of its absence from, rather than prevalence in, media discourses (Greer, 2001; Kitzinger, 1996). The representation of the full spectrum of sex offences has also been investigated (Greer, 2003).

The theoretical and methodological approaches used in these studies have varied considerably. Not unexpectedly, there is a leaning toward feminist scholarship. But analyses have been informed by a diversity of perspectives (see below). Like the literature on crime and the media more generally (Reiner *et al.*, 2000a, 2000b), much of the research on representations of sex crime has looked at all the coverage in a single, relatively short time period, or focused on specific cases (Howe, 1998; Meyers, 1997; Benedict, 1992). A good few studies, though, have considered representations over longer periods, in some cases several decades, facilitating the investigation of changes

and continuities over time (Greer, 2003; Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995; Jenkins, 1992; Soothill and Walby, 1991).

The first systematic analysis of sex crime in the media combined both of these approaches. In *Sex Crime in the News*, Soothill and Walby (1991) conducted a longitudinal analysis of press reports (primarily of rapes and sexual assaults) in the post-war period and then focused in more detail on the final year examined in their fieldwork, 1985. The questions asked in the study have resurfaced in media analyses of sex crime ever since: What is the image of sex crime portrayed in the press? Why does coverage focus on the very few disturbed serial rapists, rather than typical rape? Why is the overall media picture so distorted and inaccurate? Though serious consideration of the news production process is lacking in Soothill and Walby's (1991) study, their analysis highlights the selective, sensational and misleading way in which sex crimes are reported. The authors observe, for example, that 'sex crime for the media is essentially when a woman or girl is sexually assaulted by a total stranger. In contrast, the importance of other kinds of sexual assaults is subtly undermined in various ways by the focused reporting of the media' (1991: 148). They also note that 'serious academic work in the general area of sexual violence is poorly reported in the media', and that 'there is a lack of analysis beyond the most simple observations' (*ibid.*: 148-149). This study remains one of the most frequently cited in the academic literature.

Howe (1998), in the edited collection *Sexed Crime in the News*, approaches the issue of sex crime somewhat differently. She argues that 'there is a problem with the whole idea of 'sex crime'' (1998: 1) and is critical of Soothill and Walby (1991) because in their research 'what counts as sex crime is taken as given' (*ibid.*: 2). Though Soothill

and Walby draw attention to some important policy issues, it is suggested, ‘the sex of these apparently obvious sex crimes is never interrogated’ (*ibid.*: 2). Here it is argued that ‘sexed’ crime is a preferable term because, as one contributor explains, it ‘refers to the simultaneous relevance of both gender and sexuality’ (Atmore, 1998: 124-125). Howe’s book is thus structured around a critical framework concerned to explore popular discourses about crime, violence, gender and sexuality but also, and more interestingly, to call into question the hegemonic white Anglo feminism that has informed so many critiques of those discourses (see also Paglia, 1992). The contributions in *Sexed Crime in the News* seek to problematise conventional notions of sex crime by broadening the horizons of analysis to include a wider range of topics. These include press reporting of anti-gay laws (Morgan, 1998) and the construction of gendered and sexualised discourses around HIV/AIDS as a means of containing women and feminine sexuality (Grimwade, 1998), as well as more obvious issues like child sexual abuse (Atmore, 1998) and rape (Young, 1998).

In *Intimate Enemies: Moral Panics in Contemporary Great Britain* (1992) and *Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis* (1996) Jenkins focuses on child sex abuse (in the UK and the US respectively). This research is located within the constructionist paradigm for social problems research, which places a primary emphasis not on the objective nature of putative social problems, but on the processes through which they come into public view in the first place (Loseke, 1999; Best, 1995; Sasson, 1995; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977; Kitsuse and Spector, 1973). It seeks to establish how sex crimes and related issues come to be defined or ‘framed’ in popular consciousness (see also Pfohl, 1977; Best, 1990). Jenkins rightly insists that the construction of sex

crimes, including their representation in the media, ‘must be understood in their broader social and economic context’ (1996: 14). Hence, the social construction of child sex abuse is explored systematically from a range of different perspectives (social, cultural, economic, political), though, as in Soothill and Walby’s (1991) work, the consideration of influences within media newsrooms is notable by its absence. Perhaps most significantly, Jenkins highlights the complex and highly ideological nature of the processes through which sex crimes come to prominence in popular consciousness, and the centrality of mass media in the struggle for definitional ownership and political power (see also Thomas, 2000).

The influences within newsrooms – structure, culture, hierarchy, working habits – are taken up by Benedict (1992). In *Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes*, Benedict explores the press reporting of four major cases in the US during the 1970s and 1980s. The extent to which this small number of cases can be said to represent the ‘norm’ is questionable (Soothill, 1995), but some important arguments are advanced that have found support elsewhere (Meyers, 1997). The central theme – as the title suggests – is the press’ (and public’s) tendency to polarise women in sex crime cases into either ‘virgins’ or ‘whores’. Journalists, Benedict argues, do this ‘through their choice of vocabulary, the slant of their leads, the material they choose to put in or leave out, and they often do it unconsciously’ (*ibid.*: 26). It is suggested that the press’ insensitive and sometimes cruel treatment of women in sex crime cases is seldom due to individual malice. Rather, it results from characteristics of society that are deeply embedded within the culture, namely the gender-biased nature of language and prevailing myths about women, sex and rape. These myths guide how news is both produced and processed, but do so implicitly

in a way that can influence even the most well meaning commentators. Thus, 'a myth-saturated woman will be just as insensitive to rape cases as a myth-saturated man, especially given the conditions and habits of newsroom behaviour' (1992: 6).

More recently, Meyers (1997) has drawn similar, though in places more radical, conclusions. In her study *News Coverage of Violence Against Women*, Meyers argues that sex crime narratives are informed by 'traditional notions of appropriate gender roles' (*ibid.*: 3), which in turn are rooted in the patriarchal structures of society that institutionalise women's inequality and subjugation. While Benedict (1992) examines a few high profile sex crimes that received sustained national coverage, Meyers prefers to concentrate on local news that 'focuses more on common, noncelebrity violence that many women experience' (1997: 4). In particular, objection is made to the representation of male abuse as discrete incidents because this 'denies the social roots of violence against women and that individual incidents of abuse are part of a larger social problem' (*ibid.*: 118). News coverage is found to be influenced heavily by the 'virgin-whore' dichotomy, and notions of race, class and age which result from the convergence of 'male and white supremacist ideologies' (*ibid.*: 119). The answer for Benedict (1992) and Meyers (1997) is media reform at the individual and institutional levels. Both acknowledge that this a highly ambitious project, but both insist that reform is not beyond the realms of possibility.

Kitzinger and Skidmore's (1995) research on the construction of child sex abuse combines content analysis and interviews with journalists, professionals and survivors with focus group research to assess 'the potential and limits of people's ability to deconstruct and 'resist' media accounts' (*ibid.*: 12). The findings of their media analysis



echo many of those mentioned above. With respect to audience reception, the authors observe that while most participants ‘knew’ abuse happened more often in domestic or institutional settings, ‘their fear often focused on external sites such as woodland or wasteland’ (*ibid.*: 9). And though many ‘knew’ that abuse is most often committed by someone the child knows, ‘their fear focused on strangers’ (*ibid.*: 9). In fact, they argue, ‘audience understandings of how they might detect child abuse, the sources of danger and their ideas about intervention were often in conflict with the information which children’s charities and social work agencies are trying to promote’ (*ibid.*: 8). The incorporation of audience research demonstrates an increasingly sophisticated approach that seeks to account for the production, transmission and reception of representations of sex crime, and begins to unpack how media images, personal experience and other forms of cultural knowledge interact (see also Reiner *et al.*, 2000b).

These few examples should give some idea of the diverse methodological and theoretical approaches informing investigations of the construction of sex crime in popular discourses. They should also highlight the considerable variance in the breadth of analysis undertaken by different scholars. One common characteristic of much of this research has been its partiality; in particular, the tendency to focus on the end product of news journalism, often at the expense of considering the processes through which images of sex crime are actually produced. Yet despite their clear differences, all of the studies find that, while sensitive, restrained and informative representations of sex crime do exist, they are generally stereotypical, frequently sensational, and sometimes wholly inaccurate. These and other issues can be illustrated by turning now to my own research on the construction of sex crime in the Northern Ireland press. The points made in the

following sections are drawn from a wider research project completed in 2001, and are developed and discussed in greater detail in Greer (2003).

### **Sex Crime in the Northern Ireland Press**

In conducting this research I wanted to address the partiality of many previous studies by considering not only the representations of sex crime consumed by news readers, but also the complex (and at times highly competitive) processes through which sex crimes are constructed in press discourse. The aim was to understand and explain press representations of sex crime in their wider context. To this end, the analysis considered: key influences on news production (cultural, political, organisational, economic); the nature and significance of relationships between journalists and their sources; the resultant images of sex crime that feature in press discourse; and the relevance of wider change in late modernity. Determining what counts as 'sex crime', as we have seen, has been the subject of some debate (Thomas, 2000; Howe, 1998). For this study, legal definitions were used to classify offences into the following categories; Rape, Sexual Assault, Sexual Abuse of Children and Young Persons, Incest, Sexual Offences against the Mentally Impaired, (Consensual) Homosexual Offences, Indecency Offences, Pornography Offences, and Sexual Harassment.

The regional press in Northern Ireland comprise five main newspapers; three regional dailies (the *Belfast Telegraph*, the *Irish News* and the *News Letter*) and two Sunday regionals (the *Sunday World* and the *Sunday Life*). One further newspaper (the *Irish Times*, a daily produced in Dublin but with offices and a substantial readership in Northern Ireland) was also considered. All sex crime reports appearing in these

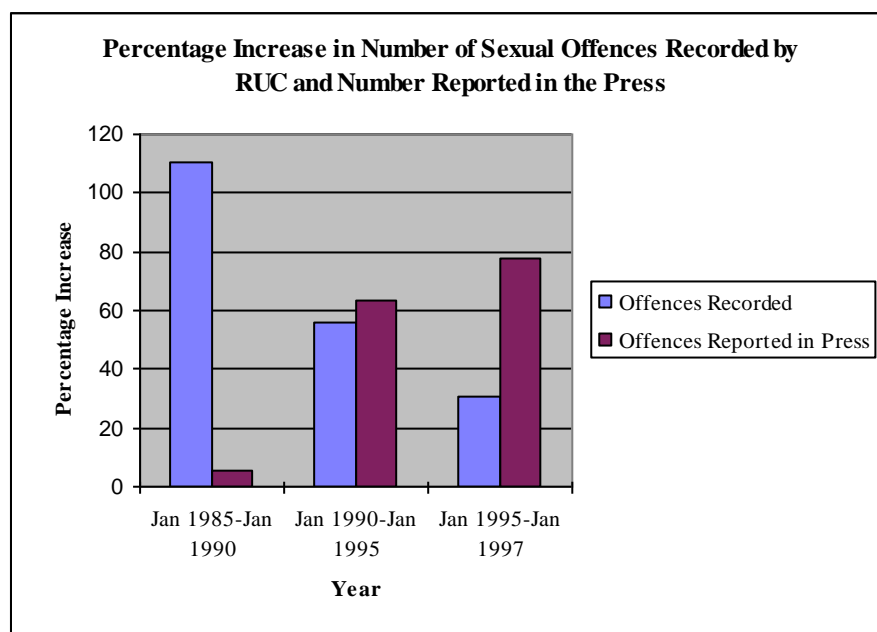
newspapers were collected and collated over four one-month periods between 1985 and 1997 (January of 1985, 1990, 1995 and 1997). This timeframe facilitated the investigation of shifts in the nature and extent of coverage over time. Data from the resultant archive, totalling just over 500 press items, was supplemented with semi-structured interviews with key players in the news production process, including journalists and editors, police and probation officers, legal practitioners, counsellors and, crucially, survivors of sexual abuse. Before discussing some of the findings, it is useful to comment briefly on the press in Northern Ireland.

### ***The Press in Northern Ireland***

The political division in Northern Ireland is reflected to varying degrees in the editorial 'lines' of the regional press insofar as each newspaper subscribes to a more or less unionist or nationalist agenda (Rolston, 1991).<sup>1</sup> In a small jurisdiction like Northern Ireland, where political culture is at the forefront of everyday life, a newspaper's position on the constitutional issue can define almost entirely the audience it attracts. More importantly, a newspaper's politics can influence profoundly its representation of the British state and its apparatuses of control. The issue of law and order in Northern Ireland is a highly contested terrain and is prone to generate deeply partisan coverage (Bromley, 1997). But while matters of crime and control are wrenched routinely into a unionist or nationalist groove, some issues are so emotionally charged that they resonate with equal intensity across cultures and transcend party politics. One such issue is the problem of sex crime (Greer, 2001).

## The Increasing Prevalence of Sex Crime in the Press

Between 1985 and 1997, the number of sex offences recorded by the police grew by 328 per cent (from 47 to 201 in January of those years), while the number of regionally committed offences reported in the press grew by 206 per cent (from 18 to 55 in January of those years). If sex crimes committed outside Northern Ireland are included, the increase rises to 216 per cent (from 31 to 98). While the number of recorded sex offences quadrupled, the number reported in the press trebled. This is not unexpected, since only a tiny fraction of criminal events, sexual or otherwise, are deemed sufficiently newsworthy to merit press attention (Surette, 1998; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994; Soothill and Walby, 1991; Hall *et al.*, 1978; MacDougall, 1968). Though sexual violence is generally considered more newsworthy than other types of criminality (Marsh, 1991), seemingly to an increasing degree (Reiner *et al.*, 2000a), a rise in the number of recorded offences does not necessarily equate to a rise in the number that make good copy. More significant is the rate of increase.



## Figure 1

Figure 1 illustrates the rate of change in the number of sex offences recorded by the police and the number reported in the press between 1985 and 1997. It indicates that press attention to sex crime (and it is worth noting that journalists receive the majority of sex crime news from the police) has increased at a much greater rate than offences recorded by the police. The rate of increase in recorded offences was negative, while the rate of increase in offences reported in the press was positive. This trend is significant. Reports of child sex abuse dominated throughout, accounting for almost half of all items in the archive (48 per cent).<sup>2</sup> The next most frequently reported offences were rape and sexual assault, which accounted for 21 and nine per cent of items respectively. There was little change in the prevalence of these offence types over time.

The dramatic and disproportionate growth in press attention to sex crime in Northern Ireland has both reflected and contributed to growing awareness about sexual victimisation. Fully explaining this increase requires consideration of a variety of influences: the changing nature of media markets; the impact of high profile cases; political change in Northern Ireland; wider cultural change in late modernity; and the activities of organisations both as news sources and in the wider public sphere. There is insufficient space to develop such a discussion here, though each of these factors and their collective impact are discussed elsewhere (Greer, 2003). Having illustrated the extent of the increase in press attention to sex crime in Northern Ireland, thus locating what follows in some sort of context, the remainder of the chapter raises some qualitative issues relating to how sex crimes are constructed.

## **The Context of Coverage: Causes, Risks and Prevention**

The vast majority of sex crime coverage (90 per cent) in the archive was case-based. That is, most items described a particular incident or series of incidents, rather than discussing wider issues like risks, prevention, resources for survivors, or debates around legal issues. This is a common finding (Kitzinger, 1996; Skidmore, 1995; more generally, see McNair, 1999; Rock, 1973). The event-based nature of reporting can be understood as a consequence of the organisational constraints on news production and the various criteria that determine the newsworthiness of press stories.

First, the need to produce reports according to tight deadlines contributes to their event-orientation because journalists seldom have time to ‘dig deeper’ in order to develop wider debates (Schudson, 2000; McNair, 1999; Galtung and Ruge, 1970). As one Belfast journalists commented: ‘We’re a daily news operation and it’s bang, bang, get a story out, and it doesn’t necessarily get the reflection it would deserve’. Second, events – including sex crimes – are more newsworthy if they are dramatic, with some element of human interest, preferably containing a novel twist, such as the involvement of persons of high status (Cavender and Mulcahy, 1998; Chibnall, 1977). These characteristics are best constituted through the portrayal of specific acts and individuals (Surette, 1998; Ericson *et al.*, 1987). This combination of influences leads to the consistent prioritisation of events over issues.

What is most striking, however, is the extent to which the discussion of wider issues diminished over time, from one in six articles in 1985 to one in fifteen in 1997 (see also Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995). Generally, journalists do not consider the discussion

of causes, risks, and prevention to be particularly newsworthy. For this reason, advice on these issues was nearly always located within the context of an ongoing investigation in which an actual offender was committing actual offences against actual victims, invariably dominated by the suggestion that the attacker could strike again. In this way, the relatively mundane discussion of general issues could be imbued with a sense of urgency and drama. The following example illustrates this point.

A series of assaults on women perpetrated by a man posing as a taxi driver received sustained coverage in the three Belfast dailies in 1995. In each report the details of the offences were described, along with a description of the attacker. The suggestion that the attacker may strike again was the dominant theme throughout and advice to women was couched in these terms. The *Belfast Telegraph* report, 'WARNING OVER BOGUS TAXIS' (04/01/95: 8), issued the investigating officer's caution that 'we don't know how dangerous this man could be', while the *News Letter*'s 'BOGUS TAXI DRIVER SPARKS RAPE ALERT' (04/01/95: 13) urged women 'to be on their guard'. Advice was thus presented as a specific and urgent 'warning' (rather than a general discussion) and formed part of a wider, highly dramatic – and highly newsworthy – narrative of a serial sex offender at large (see also Soothill and Walby, 1991).

Advice from police officers and counsellors urged women to 'phone for a taxi, ask who the driver is, and make sure it carries the Department of the Environment registered licence' (*News Letter*, 04/01/95: 13); 'only use clearly marked legal taxis' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 04/01/95: 8); and 'check taxi driver's credentials' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 03/01/95: 3). This form of direct address by accredited sources was undoubtedly helpful within the specific context of the case. Any information that might lead to a reduction in

victimisation is worthwhile. But there is a wider issue here, related to the type of offending to which advice on crime-avoidance and personal safety most often related.

The vast majority of sex offences are not committed by strangers. In most cases, whether the rape or sexual assault of women and men, or the sexual abuse of children, the victim knows the offender (Grubin, 1998; Mirless-Black *et al.*, 1998, 1996; West, 1996; Stanko and Hobdell, 1993; Stanko, 1990; Smart, 1989; Campbell, 1988; Gordon, 1988; Finkelhor and Yllo, 1985; Hall, 1985; Dobash and Dobash, 1979). Yet the discussion of risks and prevention – on the few occasions it featured – focused on offences by seemingly random predators. The association of advice on personal safety almost exclusively with these types of offence sends the clear, but deeply inaccurate, message that it is strangers who pose the greatest threat.

### **The Stages of Coverage**

Press reports were categorised into five main stages of coverage; the initial offence and investigation; court proceedings; the prison experience; post-release from prison; and other (reports not relating to any one case specifically). The most common stages were the initial offence and investigation and the court stage, which together accounted for around three-quarters of the archive. It is these stages that will form the basis of the discussion here.

### ***The Initial Offence and Investigation***

Coverage of the initial offence and the ensuing police investigation accounted for around one-quarter of news items in the archive. Offences reported at this stage were frequently



violent in nature and, further reinforcing the message that strangers pose the greatest threat, almost two-thirds of these reports (61 per cent) described assaults committed by unknown assailants. The emphasis on stranger-assaults has been identified as a prevalent feature of media discourses in a range of sex crime studies (Kitzinger, 1999b, 1996; Websdale, 1999; Kidd-Hewitt, 1995; Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995; Soothill and Walby, 1991). Soothill and Walby (1991: 34) observed a decade ago that the ‘manifestation of the sex beast in florid form does not happen very often in the media, but the coverage is consistently geared up toward sponsoring the arrival of the sex fiend on the national scene’. The disproportionate focus on cases of stranger-danger at this stage of coverage, combined with the selective issuing of advice on personal safety and crime prevention, suggests that this is also true of coverage in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the image of the predatory sex attacker, I would argue, has become even more resonant in recent years.

In late modernity, when high crime rates have become an accepted ‘social fact’ (Garland, 2000), fears about crime and personal safety focus most sharply on images of ‘outsiders’ and ‘strangers’ (Bauman, 2000; Hale, 1996). Press narratives tap into widespread fears and anxieties, feeding off prevailing associations of risk and dangerousness with the unknown ‘other’ whilst at the same time giving them substance in an ongoing dialectical interplay. One need only consider the volatile and, at times, extremely violent reaction to the re-housing of sex offenders in the community – in Belfast and elsewhere – to gain some insight into just how deeply embedded the stereotype of the sexual predator has become, especially when the potential victims are children (MacVean, 2000; Thomas, 2000; Kitzinger, 1999b).

The common perception that sex offenders are markedly different from ‘normal people’ (Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995) derives undoubtedly in part from their stereotypical representation in the media (Websdale, 1999). But also, and more subtly, it is reflective of the social and psychological processes through which distinctions are established between the normal and the deviant, the good and the evil, the ‘safe’ and the ‘unsafe’. The suggestion in media discourses that ‘the real dangers to women and children come from freakish strangers rather than intimates or companions’ (*ibid.*: 111) is in many ways easier to sustain (Smart, 1989). It is more practical in terms of day-to-day routines and, where children are concerned, more conducive to communicating where dangers may lurk (Kitzinger, 1999a).

The extent to which people’s knowledge about risk and dangerousness can conflict with their fear is demonstrated in Kitzinger and Skidmore’s (1995) focus group research on child sex abuse. In light of the above, it is perhaps not surprising that ‘images of suspicious strangers’ are found to be more potent than images of ‘dangerous uncles or threats from within the family home’ (Kitzinger, 1999a: 9). Faced with the ontological insecurities of everyday life (Giddens, 1990), a place of safety from the perceived dangers ‘outside’ is a crucial part of social existence (Bauman, 1998) – and what safer place than the home (see also Loader *et al.*, 2000). Suspicious strangers constitute a threat that, although fearsome, is more practicable than the reality; that most sexual assaults are committed by acquaintances, friends and relatives, frequently in the home.<sup>3</sup> The Northern Ireland press’ overemphasis of stranger-assaults, most concentrated in this stage of coverage, helps to reinforce the notion of ‘otherness’ associated with sex offenders, even though this might not tally with what people ‘know’, intellectually, to be true.

### *Court Proceedings*

Court reporting constituted the largest single category of items, accounting for 47 per cent of the overall archive. When broken down into the different stages of the judicial process, most court reports related to the committal or open prosecution (29 per cent of the archive). The judge's summing-up and sentencing of offenders accounted for slightly less than one-fifth (18 per cent) of the archive. The types of offence reported at this stage varied greatly, but one conspicuous feature was the much smaller proportion of reports relating to stranger-assaults (18 per cent of court reports).<sup>4</sup> The general orientation toward court coverage can be understood in both organisational and cultural terms.

Organisationally, the accepted wisdom is that the 'tendency to report cases at the stage of the trial derives partly from the economy of concentrating resources at institutional settings like courts, where newsworthy events can be expected to occur regularly' (Reiner, 2000: 142). The Northern Irish regionals each 'take a service' from freelance journalists (or 'stringers') who attend court sessions daily and sell on the 'best' stories to whoever is interested. High levels of court reporting, then, cannot be explained by the high concentration of journalists at institutional settings. That said, resources are tight, and taking a service frees up journalists for other tasks. Editors will, of course, send in-house reporters to cover cases that are especially important. But in terms of maximising the numbers of available staff, ensuring that deadlines are met, and routinising the manufacture of the news product, the organisational advantages of receiving a regular and reliable flow of pre-packaged daily court reports are clear.

In cultural terms, the emphasis on court proceedings represents an appeal to the authority of the judiciary, who are recognised as the guardians of ‘law and order’, the administrators of justice, and the definers of ‘deviance’ and ‘normality’ (Ericson *et al.*, 1991). The ‘official’ condemnation of deviants – especially those as publicly reviled as sex offenders – is nowhere more effectively (or dramatically) played out than in the courtroom (Carlen, 1976; Garfinkel, 1956). It is here that the rule of law is brought publicly to bear on those who would contravene the legal order and, in so doing, pose a threat to the wider social and moral constitution of ‘respectable’ society. Like crime more generally, individual sex crimes are seldom reported from start to finish. But the cumulative content of press representations first indicates how order is breached, and then – through the dramatisation of the investigation, trial, sentencing, and judge’s admonition – how it is restored.

In the courtroom the normative boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behaviour are re-established and a sense of moral closure is found in the ‘reassertion of the values of society and the limits of its tolerance’ (Hall *et al.*, 1978: 66). This final point is of special significance in the context of political flux in Northern Ireland, where significant sections of the community reject the legitimacy and authority of the British state. As noted, though the regional press may espouse conflicting views on other issues of law and order, the construction of sex crime is based on the assumption of a moral consensus in which party politics holds little currency. The most important differences between regional representations of sex crime relate to style and market rather than culture and ideology. Key among these is the use of language.

## **The Language of Sex Crime Narratives**

Journalists are frequently criticised for their use of sensationalist labels like ‘beast’, ‘monster’ and ‘fiend’, which further reinforce the image of sex offenders as aliens and outcasts, rather than friends, relatives and members of the community (Thomas, 2000; Websdale, 1999; Soothill *et al.*, 1998; Kitzinger, 1996; Soothill and Walby, 1991). Certainly, this was a key complaint among practitioners – and some journalists – who participated in this research. But an important distinction needs to be made here between the daily and Sunday press in Northern Ireland. The three main dailies produce news coverage that is, in large part, broadsheet in nature. The Sundays, by contrast, are tabloids in both form and flavour.

Stereotypical terms like ‘beast’, ‘monster’ and ‘fiend’ were virtually absent from daily press reporting. They appeared with much greater frequency in the Sunday tabloids, and were virtually ubiquitous in one newspaper - the *Sunday World*.<sup>5</sup> Consideration of the representations in this newspaper is most instructive here. One story, headlined ‘DON’T DUMP SICKO HERE’, began ‘Evil sex beast [named offender] has been rehoused back in Ulster in a street where children play’ (*Sunday World*, 05/01/97: 7). In another, which made the front page, the headline ‘CHILD PERVERT CHEAT CAGED AT LAST’ was followed by ‘This is the sick child sex beast convicted of shock new sex offences...’ (*Sunday World*, 26/01/97: front page). The editor had clear views on the use of these labels: ‘Survivors of sex crime call them fucking monsters, and... we are the newspaper that these people come to. And if they call them monsters, we’ll call them monsters, it’s dead simple’.

Jennifer (not her real name) is a survivor of child sex abuse whose story was reported in the Northern Ireland press. She supported fully the use of these terms, and explained why:

One of the great things that... they do is they actually call them 'monsters' and all sorts of horrible words, and I think that's great because that's exactly what these people are. I had never thought about [my uncle] like that before. He wasn't a monster, he was my uncle... I hadn't felt any anger before then. I hadn't been able to feel any anger. And that was the first time that I thought, "Yes, he is a fucking bastard, he is a fucking monster". I felt vindicated by the fact that someone had actually acknowledged that what he had done to me was horrific... I thought that that was absolutely brilliant.

A spokesperson for the Belfast Rape Crisis Centre described the cathartic release that media coverage can offer survivors, providing 'a sense of power and control over their lives to be able to speak out about the injustices they have suffered and also to help others'. The therapeutic benefits of having one's abuser publicly denounced should not be underestimated, still less overlooked. Yet on the issue of identifying the correct areas of risk, and thereby trying to reduce further victimisation, the message from practitioners and survivors interviewed for this research was clear. As Peter (not his real name), a survivor of child sex abuse, put it:

The media need to let the public know an abuser can be the most innocent looking person in creation. They range from the man next door to your uncle, to a brother or a sister. Priests, of course, lawyers, doctors, anyone... A sexual abuser has no sign to tell of his intent, none whatsoever. And that needs to come across.

The use of stereotypical labels, as many have noted (Thomas, 2000; Grubin, 1998; Soothill *et al.*, 1998), gives the clear indication that offenders are somehow visually distinguishable from ‘normal’ people.

There is a further issue regarding the use of language in the *Sunday World*. These terms were not used solely to describe child sex abusers, but all perpetrators of sex crime. The headline ‘Y-FRONT AFFRONT’, for example, introduced a tongue-in-cheek report beginning ‘An Ulster sex fiend – who gets his kicks from stealing underwear from clotheslines – leaves a trademark behind...’ (*Sunday World*, 29/01/95; 21). Another story headlined ‘GAYS IGNORE CAMERAS TO HAVE SEX IN TOILETS’ began ‘Gay sex fiends are hopping off buses and having it off in a public loo’ (*Sunday World*, 26/01/97: 13). Virtually identical terminology was used in each case to describe behaviours that differed enormously in terms of deviance, dangerousness and harm done. The indiscriminate use of these terms makes explicit the reductionist sentiment that predatory child sex abusers, people who steal underwear from clotheslines, and consenting adult homosexuals who engage in sexual acts in a public place are the same – they are all ‘sex beasts’, ‘sex fiends’, and ‘sickos’.

This practice conflates the vast diversity of ‘criminal’ sexual behaviours into one problem (see also West, 2000). The distinction between those behaviours is blurred and, by consequence, so too is the distinction between the perpetrators, who are increasingly grouped into one homogenous criminal ‘type’. In this way, the view is promoted that all sex offenders are equally dangerous and threatening, and that they are all to be reviled with the same emotional intensity. The former co-ordinator of the police service’s Child

Abuse and Rape Enquiry (CARE) unit <sup>6</sup> suggested that communities make little distinction between different types of sex offender:

It's the paedophile bandwagon, everybody goes on about paedophiles but in actual fact they are talking about anybody, any sex offender... Those people who are looking [to get] those people out of their area, they don't see the difference between a sex offender and a paedophile. It's all one group.

And the Director of the Northern Ireland Probation Service remarked that, 'sex offenders are seen as this group of people who are all the same'. The homogenisation of sex offenders in sections of the print media through the indiscriminate use of stereotypical labels contributes to both generating and sustaining this perception by implicitly reinforcing its validity in the public imagination.

### **The Aim of Sex Crime Narratives**

The use of sensational and stereotypical labels is deeply problematic, though restricted largely to the Northern Irish Sunday tabloids. <sup>7</sup> A further characteristic of press coverage, concerning the constraints on news production in a transforming market place, is experienced by reporters universally. With the proliferation of media in recent decades, competition in the press market has become especially fierce (Sparks, 2000; Thompson, 2000; Barwise and Gordon, 1998). The result has been the tabloidisation of the media, and widespread claims that outlets are 'dumbing down' in an effort to win greater market popularity (Bourdieu, 1998; Bromley, 1998; Franklin, 1997). In this climate, where, in the words of one Belfast journalist, 'newspapers have to fight to get their attention', the primary aim of sex crime narratives is not to inform. It is to shock.



As one Sunday editor explained, ‘We normally do shock first of all. After you have shocked, you then have to offer advice, and all the do’s and don’ts ... But first of all you have to shock, otherwise they’ll not be interested in reading it’. A daily broadsheet news editor described the key element as ‘the ‘F’ me’ factor, and you can imagine what the ‘F’ is for’. Echoing the determinants of newsworthiness described above, he went on to explain that sex crime stories should ideally contain ‘violence’, ‘the warning factor, you know, the idea that this could happen to anybody’ and the sense that sex crimes are being committed ‘on your doorstep’. Another broadsheet journalist noted:

I mean all journalists are in the business of shocking, and the only time I am going to get on the front page is with a story that will shock you. As a journalist I want to be on the front page and I want to find the kind of angle that will get me on the front page, and that’s just the nature of the business.

By definition ‘shock’ suggests ‘novelty’ – it conjures images of an event or situation that is ‘deviant, equivocal and unpredictable’ (Ericson *et al.*, 1991: 4). The ‘nature of the business’, then, dictates that those sex crimes that are more typical will be considered less newsworthy and, as a result, be less likely to receive even modest press coverage, still less front-page prioritisation (Meyers, 1997; Benedict, 1992). What this means is that journalists are under constant pressure to seek out new angles, better ‘spins’, the exceptions to the rule, in order to maintain a strong presence in the journalistic arena and, whenever possible, secure their by-lines on front-page stories. This pressure, in turn, militates against reporting the social reality of sex crime and, therefore, impedes the construction of narratives that promote greater understanding of the phenomenon.

## **Conclusions**

There are clear problems with the representation of sex crimes in the press. I have highlighted just a few, namely the implicit and explicit suggestion that the strangers pose the greatest threat, the homogenisation of sex crime and its perpetrators through the indiscriminate use of highly emotive and stereotypical language, and the decline in discussions around wider issues like causes, risks and prevention. These characteristics are concentrated in, but by no means restricted to, the tabloid press in Northern Ireland, and have been widely evidenced by studies examining representations of sex crime elsewhere. Any analysis of press representations of sex crime, however, would be incomplete if it failed to acknowledge the clear benefits that have resulted from the increased prevalence of the issue in newsprint media discourse (Gough, 1996).

Press attention to sex crime has been central in creating a climate in which survivors feel less inhibited about coming forward and disclosing their abuse, whether to counselling organisations or the police. The Belfast Rape Crisis Spokesperson commented that ‘the media has been part of raising public awareness. [There is] more awareness and slightly less feeling ashamed than there would have been ten years ago... That doesn’t change how they feel inside, but it might change whether they are prepared to come forward’. Newspapers in Northern Ireland, including the tabloids, have produced informative accounts that contain all the elements of drama and human interest that make for compelling reportage, without the sensationalism and stereotyping that characterises so much coverage. The same is true for the press in other jurisdictions (Gough, 1996; Skidmore, 1995; Benedict, 1992). But the problems are still profound.

My research in Northern Ireland thus far has sought to understand and explain press representations of sex crime in their wider context. In the process, as noted above, I have tried to address the partiality of many earlier studies by investigating both the news product and the processes through which that product comes to be formed, framed and textured. The findings highlight a wide range of influences that militate against portraying the social reality of sex crime. Market pressures, structural-organisational constraints, the determinants of newsworthiness, and the career aspirations of individual journalists in an increasingly competitive industry all orient representations of sex crime toward the sensational and the shocking, usually at the expense of any serious discussion around issues that might actually help to reduce victimisation. Some of those interviewed for this study went so far as to suggest that press representations may actually increase the chances of victimisation by identifying the wrong areas of risk and misdirecting efforts at prevention and protection (see Greer, 2003). Those who would seek to reform the way in which the newsprint media portray sex crimes must engage seriously with each of those issues outlined above. And that challenge will not easily be overcome.

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<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, unionists support the maintenance of the union between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and nationalists advocate the establishment of a united Ireland, comprising both north and south, subject to the executive powers of an all-Ireland government. For detailed accounts of the conflict, see the following (Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 1996; Ruane and Todd, 1996; McGarry and O'Leary, 1995, 1993; Boyer Bell, 1993; Bew and Gillespie, 1993; O'Dowd *et al.*, 1980). With respect to the press, the *Belfast Telegraph* and *News Letter* are openly unionist, and the *Irish News* is openly nationalist. The *Irish Times* claims to be a 'paper of record' with a non-partisan stance on the constitutional issue, but is widely acknowledged as maintaining a pro-nationalist line. The Sunday papers are less overtly political. The *Belfast Telegraph's* sister publication, the *Sunday Life*, was described by a number of journalists as 'fairly neutral'. In the words of the editor, 'we are obviously a 'law and order' newspaper. We are supportive of the security forces, but we don't write them a blank cheque'. The *Sunday World* claims political neutrality. In practice, however, it leans more toward nationalism.

<sup>2</sup> Media attention to the issue of child sex abuse has been such that examinations of press coverage elsewhere have evidenced a phenomenon generically referred as 'social problem fatigue' (Finkelhor, 1994), but in the present context more specifically known as 'child abuse fatigue' (Goddard, 1996; Skidmore,

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1995; Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995). It describes a level of journalistic ‘overkill’ on child sex abuse stories, where editors and reporters become frustrated with continually producing reports on the same phenomenon, and at the same time concerned that readers will grow weary of reading them. There was no evidence of child abuse fatigue in the Northern Ireland press (see also Goddard, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> This would appear to be a type of displacement. For a discussion from a psychoanalytic perspective of the role of anxiety and, in particular, its displacement in fear of crime, see Jefferson and Hollway (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Establishing the proportion of court reports addressing stranger-assaults raises the issue of what constitutes a ‘stranger’. Although no pre-existing relationship may be stated explicitly in a press report, if ‘consent’ is cited as the key issue (which it frequently is) the victim and offender must have been known to each other, if only in the most casual sense. If a woman is walked home and then assaulted by someone she has met in a bar that night, for example, there is some sort of pre-existing relationship, but they may reasonably still be thought of as relative strangers. In this analysis, stranger-assaults were taken to be those cases in which the victims were – or so it seemed from the report – sexually assaulted by individuals with whom they had no apparent previous relationship or contact.

<sup>5</sup> This type of language would appear to be used with much greater frequency in the English national press, and not just in the tabloids (Soothill *et al.*, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> The Child Abuse and Rape Enquiry (CARE) unit was established in 1985 to deal exclusively with sex crime cases. Police reforms – and the CARE unit especially – were widely praised by practitioners and survivors interviewed for this research.

<sup>7</sup> Though it should be noted that all of the national English newspapers are readily available in Northern Ireland, including those tabloids which, as Soothill *et al.*, (1998) show, use these terms regularly.