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Standing up to complexity

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Standing up to Complexity: Researching Moral Panics in Social Work

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Abstract

Moral panics are central to social work policy and practice. Voluntary agencies and statutory bodies (including governments) create and sustain moral panics in order to raise awareness of, and win support for, their own understandings of social issues and problems. This is not a neutral enterprise; on the contrary, moral panics often have consequences that are negative, whether intended or unintended. Far from leading to greater social justice and a more equal society, they may reinforce stereotypes and lead to fearful, risk-averse practice. This paper discusses one such moral panic in 2013 that centred on the story of 'Maria', a Bulgarian Roma child living in Greece. The paper explores the meaning and use of the concept of moral panic before unpacking this case-study example in more detail. We argue that the moral panic over 'Maria' has much to tell us about ideas of welfare and protection, institutional racism and children and childhood, as well as the connections between 'private troubles' and 'public issues'. We conclude that social work as a profession must stand up to complexity, and in doing so, be aware of its own role in relation to moral panics. (191 words)

Introduction

Raising the subject of moral panics and social work is neither an easy nor a neutral undertaking. The term 'moral panic' has been so widely used in recent years, that there is a widespread public perception that if something is a moral panic, it is somehow not real. Because of this, anyone suggesting that social work is influenced by moral panics risks being accused of dismissing legitimate social concerns and in doing so, minimising the genuine grievances of individuals and groups. They may even be accused of overplaying some harms; of creating moral panics about moral panics! We therefore begin this paper with full awareness that we must ask readers to set aside their everyday perception of 'moral panic' and instead consider that moral panics may be an indication of the, at-times uncomfortable, intersection between 'private troubles' and 'public issues' (Mills, 1959). More than this, we will argue that it is the failure to recognise the way in which genuine concerns become full-blown panics that is itself dangerous; greater harm may result from responses to panics than from the events that precipitate them, and a social work policy and practice that is not sufficiently critical may find itself complicit in these responses.

The paper begins by considering definitions of the concept of moral panic, from its beginnings in 1970s sociology in the UK. We then go on to look in detail at a European moral panic that emerged in Greece in 2013, which centred on a Bulgarian Roma child named 'Maria', who was taken by police from her home in a Roma settlement amidst fears of child trafficking and abduction. (We describe the child as 'Maria' throughout this article, to draw attention to the fact that although this is the name she was given, it is not her real name.) We conclude by arguing that social work practitioners, policy-makers and educators should be encouraged to stand up to complexity and confront the private troubles and public issues that concern us all, asking – What is going on here? Whose interests are being served? What are the implications of this likely to be, and for whom? 'Maria''s story illustrates many of the dilemmas at the heart of child protection social work across Europe today, and, arguably, across the world. It is, fundamentally, a story about welfare and protection, about institutional racism, and about meanings of children and childhood. It is

also, as we will see, a story that demonstrates that the personal must be placed in the context of the wider social structure in order to understand the true impact of good intentions, intended and unintended.

Background

The term 'moral panic' is one that has passed from sociological theory into everyday usage with barely a pause for breath. It emerged in the sociology of deviance in the 1970s, as firstly, Jock Young and then Stan Cohen (himself a qualified social worker), sought to explain the impact of social reaction on those who engaged in what was considered 'deviant' behaviour. Young (1971) explored the social reaction against drug taking, observing that we condemn those who use drugs not because drugs are implicitly harmful (lots of things that are harmful are not outlawed in the same way), but because of 'moral indignation' that those who use drugs are somehow less productive and more hedonistic than those who do not. He further notes that moral indignation is often 'fronted by an air of benign humanitarianism' (p. 102). Looking back, Young argues that the 20th century had witnessed 'the emergence of a vast array of experts in deviancy' (ib.id), so much so that competition had emerged between disciplinary interests. As groups fought for their turf, so the media was drawn into a 'moral crusade' (p. 104); more than this, they fanned the flames of what Young called a 'moral panic' through a process of 'deviancy amplification' (p. 182).

The idea of moral panic as social reaction and deviancy amplification was picked up by Stan Cohen (1972), who had trained and practised as a psychiatric social worker before embarking on doctoral research in which he examined the confrontations between Mods and Rockers on the beaches of seaside towns in the South of England in the 1960s. Cohen set out what has become the classic definition of moral panics. It is repeated in full because of its importance to our overall discussion:

> 'Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. 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.' (1972, p. 9)

Some important points should be made at the outset. As Cohen emphasises, 'The argument is not that there is '"nothing there" ... but that the reaction to what is observed or inferred is fundamentally inappropriate' (2002, p. 172). It was disproportionality that Hall *et al* explored further in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), where they argued that the moral panic that had erupted around the 'discovery' of the phenomenon of 'mugging' (otherwise known as petty street crime) in 1972 was successful because of its ability to create a consensus about the nature of the problem and the solutions to it.

Goode and Ben Yehuda (1994) outline the main features of a moral panic as follows: (i) concern (some reported conduct or event sparks anxiety); (ii) hostility (the perpetrators are portrayed as 'folk devils'); (iii) consensus (there is a broad and unified social reaction); (iv) disproportionality (the extent of the conduct and the threat it poses are exaggerated); (v) volatility (panics emerge suddenly, but can dissipate just as quickly too). Garland suggests that this is a useful summary, but contends that it omits two important features of Cohen's conceptualisation: firstly, that there is a <u>moral</u> dimension to the social reaction that needs to be considered, 'particularly the introspective soul-searching that accompanies these

episodes'; and secondly, that the deviant conduct in question is 'often seen as symptomatic, for example, of a wider malaise' (2008, p. 11). Moral panics are not, in this sense, accidental.

Jock Young, in some of his later work (2007, 2009), develops this point further. He argues that the social conditions that give rise to moral panic have intensified with the ever-greater pace of societal shifts and the sense of social insecurity which result. For Young, the propensity for moral panic is located within wider structural changes in society and psychological responses to these. Moral panics are, then, moral disturbances 'centring on claims that direct interests have been violated'. They are 'not simply panics, media generated or otherwise that provide false information' (2009, p. 13). Moral disturbance is characterised by a feeling of anxiety; in that sense, it is real, and cannot be readily dismissed as irrational. Moral panics take personal anxiety to a societal level; they do not occur when political and social structures are solid and successful, but rather, when they are in crisis, when society's 'tectonic plates' are shifting (2009, p. 14). Scapegoated groups are not chosen by accident, but are closely related to the source of anxiety. The Roma, as we will demonstrate, are one such scapegoated group.

For the last two years, we have been involved in a cross-disciplinary study that has explored the relevance of 'moral panic' theory to current social issues and anxieties. Our work began with a research seminar series on moral panics sponsored by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This led us into empirical research and academic writing on topics that have been identified within this 'moral panic' discourse, including historical abuse in residential childcare (Smith, Cree & Clapton, 2012), child trafficking (Cree, Clapton & Smith, 2014), pornography (Smith & Cree, 2014), social work and the media (Beddoe and Cree, forthcoming) and child protection (Clapton, Cree & Smith, 2013a and 2013b). We have also blogged and tweeted on all aspects of contemporary social concerns that might be perceived to be moral panics, including child sexual abuse, young people and sexuality, and

the 2012 UK riots, to name just a few (see http://moralpanicseminarseries.wordpress.com). One of our blogs drew attention to the story of five-year old 'Maria' in Greece. We now unpack this story in more detail, using Cohen's model of a moral panic as our starting-point for analysis.

The story of 'Maria'

On 16th October 2013, a blonde, fair-skinned and green-eyed girl was discovered in a police raid on a Roma settlement on the outskirts of the town of Farsala in central Greece. Police officers were looking for illegal drugs and unregistered firearms, and they came across a little girl aged, they thought, about five years, who looked different: not only was she white in appearance, but she seemed distressed. The police officers were immediately concerned that she had been trafficked; the Roma couple with whom she was found to be living were suspected of either abducting or buying her. Neither adult was able to produce papers to prove that she was their child; they were arrested and the little girl was taken into care, while investigations into her background were carried out. A week later, another blonde girl (aged seven years) was taken from her carers, this time from a housing estate on the West of Dublin in Ireland, after an anonymous tip-off to the Gardai (police) via Facebook. On this second occasion, DNA tests later that day proved conclusively that she was the biological child of the adults with whom she was living, and she was returned home. (see news-story from *The Telegraph*,

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ireland/10400876/Irish-court-orders-blonde-haired-girl-taken-from-Roma-family-to-be-returned.html)

We have deliberately pared back these stories to the factual details; what now needs to be added is the explosion of media and public attention that emerged at this time – this was, without doubt, a classic illustration of a moral panic, as we will now set out, using Cohen's model as outlined above.

<u>Stage One</u>

'A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests' (1972, p. 1).

In this case, it was child trafficking that was at the heart of the issue. Trafficking has been a subject of world-wide concern in recent years, with governments and voluntary agencies both campaigning to draw attention to the trafficking of adults and children, who are reported to have been abducted, stolen or sold into domestic service, dangerous work, or, worse still, prostitution and the sex industry. Child trafficking raises additional anxieties, because of children's vulnerability to child sexual abuse and exploitation. We have already suggested that heightened anxieties over child trafficking might be indicative of moral panic (Cree, Clapton & Smith, 2014). This is not to suggest that people (including children) are not on the move; global poverty, climate change and civil unrest across the world mean that ever-greater numbers of people are fleeing disaster and persecution, just as the response to this has been the introduction of ever-more stringent immigration policies in the countries of destination. Nor is this to suggest that child trafficking never happens: each year, a number of cases across Europe emerge where babies and children are sold to adoption agencies by their poverty-stricken parents. For example, a news-story in *The Economist*, 22nd October 2013, entitled 'Maria's Fate', reported that one Bulgarian child-trafficking ring uncovered by police in 2011 had asked its Greek clients to pay €25,000 for a boy and €20,000 for a girl. The child's mother would receive a payment of €2,000 (http://www.economist.com/blogs/charlemagne/2013/10/roma-greece). This is, of course, a matter of concern, for social work as well as for European society as a whole. But we would argue that although child trafficking is an important social issue, we need to separate out evidence from assertion. Just as importantly, we need to think carefully about what a measured response and helpful reaction to it might look like; removing such children from their carers and taking them into public care might not, in reality, be seen to be either measured or helpful.

This episode was not simply about child trafficking, however. It was, more specifically, about child-stealing by Roma people, already judged for centuries to be 'folk devils', to be treated with suspicion and fear (see Clark, forthcoming; Tyler, 2013). It is estimated that there are between 10 and 12 million Roma across Europe, with 250,000 in Greece alone; the European Court of Human Rights has found that Greece, alongside countries such as Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Hungary, has segregated its Roma communities, with thousands of people living together in squalid housing (shacks and containers from ships), with little opportunities for legitimate, paid work (see www.equaltimes.org/little-maria-and-anti-roma, 28th January 2014). In some Roma settlements, illegal activities such as drug dealing and the trading of stolen goods are known to take place, but in a news-story, from 2013, Roma leaders protest that 'criminal elements represent only a small fragment of the community' ('Old attitudes resurface in Greece', *The Independent*, 23rd October 2013, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/old-attitudes-resurface-in-greece-inside-the-roma-camp-where-maria-the-blonde-angel-lived-8897530.html). A report by Amnesty International from 2014 highlights the widespread stigma and discrimination experienced by Roma people in Greece, often at the hands of the authorities. This report states:

> 'At a time when Greece has seen a steep increase in racially motivated attacks and xenophobia, Amnesty International has serious concerns about the inadequate response of the law enforcement authorities towards hate crime. This includes failing to intervene to stop racially motivated attacks when they were present on the scene; arresting victims with irregular status rather than the perpetrators of hate crimes; failing to protect people from attacks by far-right groups; discouraging victims from filing complaints; and failing to investigate or to investigate effectively those complaints that are lodged including by unearthing the possible hate motive. In many cases police officers themselves are perpetrators of hate crime' (2014: 21).

It is undoubtedly the case that at the time 'Maria''s story emerged (and now), the Roma in Greece were perceived as on the margins of society, a threat and threatened in equal measure. Not only this, their marginal status was reinforced by their poverty. It is known that many Greek Roma people do not register the births of their children because of the prohibitive cost of obtaining a birth certificate. This, then, means that they are not known by the authorities; their entitlement to welfare services, education etc. is removed, at the same time as their protection and avenues of support. This was, in many ways, a moral panic waiting to happen; if it hadn't been 'Maria', it would have been another story that highlighted the Roma as society's scapegoats or 'folk devils'.

Stage two:
'Its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media' (ib.id.)

The stories in both Greece and Ireland were presented by the media in very particular ways. In both cases, the blonde-ness of the girls was emphasised, in contrast to the dark-ness of their carers, as well as the fact that they were young and pretty. The girl in Greece was called 'the blonde angel' and given the name 'Maria' (as reported by Louise Doughty in 'An angel kidnapped by gypsies?' in *The Guardian*, 22nd October 2013 http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/22/angel-kidnapped-by-gypsies-libel-replayed). Photographs of 'Maria' looking sad with her hair in plats dominated the newspapers and television screens across Europe for days on end. The language used to describe her situation was highly emotive: the camp that she was living was described in the UK tabloid press as 'squalid'. A news-story by Ryan Parry entitled 'Faked. Gypsies staged pics to cover up girl's neglect' was illustrative of much of this. He wrote: 'unkempt children played in the street waving sticks at strangers. Old motorbikes and car parts littered the neighbourhood, while stray dogs rummaged through piles of rubbish' (*The Sun*, 24th October 2013, http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/5219850/pictures-of-missing-girl-maria-room-staged-to-protect-gypsy-community.html). A home video of 'Maria' dancing at a party

that was shown repeatedly on television news was described in another newspaper story as 'disturbing' evidence of Maria 'dancing for her captors' (*Daily Mail,* 23rd October 2013, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2474417/Maria-groomed-child-bride-Roma-Gypsy-couple.html). Underpinning almost all the reporting of the case was a racist characterisation of the situation, the 'dark-skinned' adults contrasted with the 'fair-skinned' child.

Stage three

'The moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people'; 'socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions' (ib.id.)

Interestingly, the telling of this story was left largely to the media. Children's charities and others seemed wary of getting involved and expressing their opinions about the case. But the case was said on various occasions to 'offer hope' to the parents of Ben Needham (who had disappeared in Greece in 1991) and Madeleine McCann (who had disappeared in Portugal in 2007) that their children might still be alive, again affirming the idea that Roma people steal children. *The Guardian* newspaper bravely went against the tide of mainstream public opinion on 22nd October 2013, reporting that historically, it is Roma children who have experienced being 'stolen'; for example, between 1926 and 1972, hundreds of Yenish Roma boys and girls were removed from their families by the authorities in Switzerland on the pretext of child welfare concerns. *The New York Times* also reported that the Roma live in fear of their children being removed, 'for no reason other than their cultural identity or skin colour' (story by Dan Bilefsky, 'Roma, feared as kidnappers, see their own children at risk', 25th October 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/26/world/europe/for-the-roma-fears-of-kidnapping-in-europe-only-mirror-their-own.html).

One of the important elements that could not have been imagined by Cohen in his discussion of moral panics was the part played by social media in the unfolding moral panic. Many of those who engaged in fuelling the moral panic – the 'right-thinking people' - were

not 'experts' at all, and instead were ordinary members of the public who tweeted and

blogged and sent literally tens of thousands of emails and phone-calls to the police and to

the children's charity where 'Maria' had been taken. This was, in large part, as a direct result

of actions taken by the Greek police, who, at a press conference two days after 'Maria' had

been found, asked for international help to locate her parents

(http://www.astynomia.gr/index.php?option=ozo_content&perform=view&id=33338&Itemid=1

181&lang=EN)

Social media thus increased both the number and the influence of 'moral entrepreneurs', for

good or for ill, as this example demonstrates.

The role of social media in moral panics is a topic that is only now beginning to enter the

academic arena. Some have argued that social media is a liberalising force, allowing more

oppositional voices to be heard and thus creating more opportunities for dissent (e.g.

Howard *et al,* 2011, on the rise of the so-called 'Arab Spring'). Others have asserted that

while social media may contain more voices, this may be more voices saying the same

(limited) things as before, talking to their own supporters, not to the wider community as a

whole, as discussed in a recent blog on the conflict in Gaza (Lotan, 2014). The story of

'Maria' shows that social media can and does speak to a wider public, and has an impact

both on public opinion and governmental action. In 'Maria''s case, the sheer force of public

interest in the story made it impossible for her to be returned to the family with whom she

had been living. This is not, we would argue, an influence to be dismissed lightly.

Stage four

'Ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to' (ib.id.)

'Maria' was taken into the care of the charity 'Smile of the Child', to a children's home in

Athens, 280 kilometres from her home in Farsala. Eleftheria Dimopoulou and Christos Sali,

the couple who were caring for her, were jailed on charges of kidnapping and falsifying birth

records. They claimed that they had adopted 'Maria' with the permission of her biological mother, and their story was later confirmed when Maria's birth mother was located in a village in Bulgaria. In spite of this, the Greek authorities formally removed all guardianship rights from Dimopoulou and Sali shortly afterwards; their other children were placed with foster parents. It seems unlikely that 'Maria' will ever again see the family that raised her or the community that she lived in until she was five years of age.

<u>Stage five</u>

'The condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible… Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten…; 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' (ib.id.).

There has been almost no media interest in this story since the middle of November 2013. There has been no reporting of what happened to either 'Maria''s carers or her birth parents. Meanwhile, the decision taken by a Greek court in early June 2014 that the Smile charity be awarded full custody of 'Maria', who will stay in care until she is 18 years of age, was given only passing mention in the press. Yet this was a Bulgarian Roma child who was taken from everything that was familiar to her – her language, culture and people. She will no doubt be 'scarred' by her experience, as the children's home director admitted in an interview reported in the *Daily Mail* on 3rd June 2014 ('Court rules that blonde girl taken from Roma family in Greece last year will be raised by children's charity', http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2647029/Court-rules-blonde-girl-taken-Roma-family-Greece-year-raised-childrens-charity.html#ixzz3a2Ate4Tr). It seems likely that she will need substantial counselling and support to recover from her ordeal. Likewise, the removal of the child in Ireland (although with far less serious consequences) seems likely to have caused long-term repercussions for the child, for her family, and for others in the Irish Roma community; nightmares, fear and distrust of police and authorities, confirmation of a long-held realisation that their lives are

characterised by racism and oppression would seem to be the only outcomes of this unhappy incident.

Discussion

The moral panic exemplified by the story of 'Maria' draws into sharp relief many of the dilemmas at the heart of child protection social work across Europe today, and, arguably, across the world. It is, at its core, about welfare and protection, institutional racism and children and childhood. It also sheds light on the connection between the individual ('personal troubles') and social structure ('public issues') (Mills, 1959). We will now consider each in turn.

<u>Welfare and protection</u>

It seem likely that the motivations of the police officers who took 'Maria' into care were ones of welfare and protection. They would have been familiar with child trafficking concerns, and if 'Maria' had indeed been stolen, then she was a child at risk and her birth parents might have been searching for her for years. The fact that this was an instance of informal adoption or long-term fostering rather than trafficking could not be proved by her carers at the time of her removal, and the police officers, arguably, did the best they could for the child by taking her into care. At the same time, when the Greek court decided eight months later to leave 'Maria' in the care of the children's home, it did what was judged to be in her 'best interests'. In fact, it would have been very difficult for the court to have done anything else; faced with world-wide press interest, how could the court have justified a decision to return 'Maria' either to her birth parents (who had given her to friends to look after) or to her informal carers (who had been imprisoned)? Furthermore, how could they have explained returning her to a life of poverty and hardship? What she was being offered by the charity (again, for 'Maria''s 'own good') was a good upbringing and, above all, an education. With this 'second chance' in her grasp, how could they not confirm her status as a child in care?

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Child-saving is, of course, a familiar scenario within social work. Accounts of the removal of Aboriginal children in Australia (Read, 2006) and Maori children in New Zealand (Mikaere, 1994), as well as the deportation of thousands of poor white children from the UK to Australia and Canada in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Melville and Bean, 1990), are reminders that social work has often sought to 'rescue' children for their own good, to give them a 'fresh start' in life. A renewed emphasis on child rescue is also in keeping with recent trends that have championed adoption, as witnessed over the last ten years or so in the UK (PIU, 2000). Faced with the choice between the poor with their troubled lives and uncertain futures and the promise of settled middle-class living, who wouldn't believe in child rescue? The problem is that dismantling families rarely results in long-term good, for anyone. In this respect, the narrow, individualist standpoint of child protection often fails to acknowledge wider societal (public) issues that can be occluded by moral panics such as this one, as recent writing on child protection (e.g. Featherstone et al, 2014) confirms. But this was not only a story of welfare and protection; it was also a story of 'race' and racism.

Institutional racism

We have already indicated that the police intervention in the Roma settlement in Farsala can be understood as an illustration of institutional racism; Amnesty International's report documents this well. What happened next, however, also demonstrates further the workings of racism, and most especially, prejudice about 'dark-skinned' and 'fair-skinned' people. There were many children living in the Roma settlement on 16th October 2013 who were not removed by police: it was 'Maria''s colouring that drew her to their attention, and which was stressed in all the media coverage that followed. The fact that there are many blonde Roma was not acknowledged in most of this reporting, although this fact was widely known.

The 'Maria' story also brings to mind another illustration of our rather confused ideas about 'race'. There has been surprisingly little comment in the social work literature about the

practice of inter-country adoption where prominent white personalities have adopted black children from African countries (Madonna and Nicole Kidman are two such high profile examples). On the contrary, this has been presented by some as praise-worthy, child-saving behaviour, as Smolin writes, as 'a heart-warming act of goodwill that benefits both a child and adoptive family' (2005: 403). In contrast, some critics have condemned inter-country adoption as 'modern-day imperialism, allowing dominant, developed cultures to strip away a developing country's most precious resources, its children' (Martin, 2007: 174).

Whatever we may think about inter-country adoption, the connection between moral panics and institutional racism is not a new one. It was Stuart Hall and his colleagues who first pointed out that the themes of 'race', crime and youth coalesced in the image of the black 'mugger' (street thief) in the early 1970s in Britain; the 'mugging' scare, they argue, came to serve as the 'articulator' or 'ideological conductor' (1978: viii) of a crisis in hegemony, that is, a breakdown in the post-war consensus, and in the notion of government by consent. In its place, a new 'law-and-order' society was taking root, and a key instrument in facilitating this change was, they assert, the creation of 'mugging' as a moral panic, with black youth as enemy number one. Moral panics, Young (2009) argues, are acts of 'othering' that provide false information; they displace social anxieties onto particular scapegoats. In the 1970s, it was young black men. In the 'Maria' story, it was the Roma, familiar scapegoats for society's ills, across Europe and across centuries, currently shouldering the blame (along with all the poorer countries in Europe) for the failures of neoliberalism. This takes us to children and childhood.

Children and childhood

The story of 'Maria' is one that ultimately reinforces the idea of the innocent, vulnerable child at risk and in need of protection. Christensen (2000) has argued that vulnerability is a key feature of Western conceptions of childhood; this vulnerability is both socially constructed and biological, and is intimately tied up in ideas of children as innocent and lacking in

competence (Best, 1994; Platt, 1969; Wyness, 2012). Child trafficking stories replay this representation of children as powerless and childhood as a special time that must be protected at all costs. Meanwhile, a whole child protection industry of 'child savers' has grown up over the last 100 years or so, as has been explored in Clapton, Cree & Smith (2013 a and b). This industry not only sustains public attention regarding children 'at risk', but also highlights new ways that children are being threatened and endangered, including through trafficking. The end-result of this activity, we have argued, is that more and more children are coming under the 'child protection radar' (2013a: 17).

Meyer takes this point further. She argues that childhood has become a moral rhetoric that can legitimise anything without having to explain it. Mere mention of the word 'child' becomes a short-hand for sacralisation and moral status; as she writes: '*any* opinion can be justified by simply referring to children, and without having to explain *why* and *how* children justify it' (2007 p. 99). (Italics in original.) Returning to the 'Maria' story, because she is a 'child', no-one needed to justify the decisions that were taken to 'protect' her; no other view was required or sought. This, we would argue, is hugely problematic, not least because it may lead to uncritical practice and the silencing of alternative perspectives.

The connection between 'private troubles' and 'public issues'

Studying moral panics has forced us to step outside social work's familiar comfort zone and ask: what is really going on here? What might this story have to tell us about wider social problems? What are we *not* seeing when our heart-strings are pulled by images of an unhappy blonde child? As we have stated, moral panics invariably have negative outcomes, some of which might be foreseen, and others that are not. Moral panics stereotype and label 'folk devils' as 'perpetrators', 'abusers', 'criminals', and in 'Maria''s case, 'child snatchers'. They lead to disproportionate responses and/or punitive legislation: a childhood spent in care for 'Maria' and imprisonment for her carers. Moral panics also feed a wider climate of fear, and may lead to risk-averse social work practice and a more fearful society as a whole.

It seems likely that the 'Maria' story will have led to more, not less, stigmatisation of Roma communities, as demonstrated in the removal of the second Roma child in Ireland, and as seen in the continuing discrimination experienced by Roma living in the UK (see Clark, forthcoming and Tyler, 2013). The story may also, inadvertently or otherwise, have stoked up fears of the negative impact of Eastern European immigration. As our television screens and newspapers were swamped by photographs of Roma settlements in Bulgaria, what underlying messages were being conveyed? Certainly not the negative impact of neoliberal policies on the poor, or the legacy of racism within Europe. This is why moral panics matter most, because they draw attention away from 'public issues' by encouraging us to focus only on 'private troubles'.

Conclusion

The story of 'Maria' has, along with all the case-studies we have explored throughout the moral panic seminar series, allowed us to think more critically about the role of social work today. Not only has this encouraged us to ask, what is going on here?, but it has led us to stand up to complexity, to ask, what are we <u>not</u> seeing and doing while a moral panic is in full swing? On 27th August 2014, two stories dominated the lunchtime headlines on BBC Radio 4. The first concerned the resignation of a Conservative Member of the UK Parliament, Douglas Carswell MP, who had defected to the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). His stated reasons for doing so were the government's failure to tackle immigration and reduce the power of the European Union on UK affairs. The second story focused on an inquiry report into child sexual exploitation between 1997 and 2013 in Rotherham, England, that had been published the previous day (Jay, 2014). A police spokesperson was quoted as saying that one of the issues that had led to the police's reluctance to take action at an earlier point had been "the involvement of men of Pakistani heritage" in the young women's abuse. He went on to say that the same situation is happening today within the Roma community, "where the sexual norms for 13 and 14 year old girls are very different". This statement was allowed to pass without question by the well-

respected news journalist conducting the interview. These two stories both tell us a great deal about the 'Maria' moral panic. While attention was focused on a blonde, pigtailed five-year old girl in Greece, racism and xenophobia remained submerged; poverty, inequality and discrimination were allowed to remain unchecked and unchallenged.

We are currently going through the worst economic crisis in living memory in Europe; the gap between rich and poor is widening; immigrants and asylum seekers are experiencing increased hostility and violence across the world. At the European Social Work Research conference in 2014, Walter Lorenz, in a keynote, argued that social work research must have the capacity to confront uncertainty; to relate research to what matters practically and ethically, in order to improve the social condition. Our investigation of moral panic does not claim to have all the answers, but it does raise some critical questions for social work policy and practice. It suggests that social work research must look beyond its own narrow concerns about 'what works' to locate its endeavours within a wider body of sociological/ social scientific thinking. In addressing a social work audience in 1975, Cohen urged social workers to stay unfinished. He wrote:

> 'In your practice and in theory stay "unfinished". Do not be ashamed of working for short-term humanitarian or libertarian goals, but always keep in mind the long-term political prospects. This might mean living with the uncomfortable ambiguity that your most radical work will be outside your day-to-day job. Most important: do not sell out your clients' interests for the sake of ideological purity or theoretical neatness' (1998: 112).

These are important, and we believe, ultimately encouraging messages for social work. We must stand up to complexity and in doing so, resist the pressure to respond uncritically and disproportionately to moral panics, while, at the same time, we must confront the painful truth that social work has, at times, both engendered and supported moral panics, by exaggerating risks and scapegoating individuals and groups, including those we have

labelled as 'other' (Ben-Ari and Strier, 2010). The 'Maria' story was, in the end, a classic morality tale, and one that we have all chosen to forget. Yet her story, as we have seen, forces us to question the vary basis of child protection as it is currently practised. Such is the power of a moral panic analysis for social work.

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