Moral Panic and Social Theory: Beyond the Heuristic

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ABSTRACT

Chas Critcher has recently conceptualized moral panic as a heuristic device, or 'ideal type'. While he argues that one still has to look beyond the heuristic, despite a few exceptional studies there has been little utilization of recent developments in social theory in order to look 'beyond moral panic'. Explicating two current critical contributions – the first, drawing from the sociologies of governance and risk; the second, from the process/figurational sociology of Norbert Elias – this article highlights the necessity for the continual theoretical development of the moral panic concept and illustrates how such development is essential to overcome some of the substantial problems with moral panic research: normativity, temporality, and (un)intentionality.

Introduction

> 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 panic' is a sociological concept that seeks to explain a particular type of over-reaction to a perceived social problem. Developed in the turbulent political and intellectual context of the late 1960s, its principal aim was to expose the processes involved in creating concern about a social problem; concern that bore little relationship to the reality of the problem, but nevertheless provided the basis for a shift in social or legal codes. The concept has since enjoyed a great deal of analytical purchase, circumscribing it to be one of the few sociological ideas that have withstood the test of time (see Innes, 2005). However, much of its application has relied upon ritually reproducing the 'stages' implied in the now canonized opening paragraph of Stanley Cohen's (1972) seminal study, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Critcher, 2006: 10; see also Young, 2009).

As a result, as Miller and Kitzinger (1998: 221) observe, moral panic has been 'applied to everything from single mothers to working mothers, from guns to Ecstasy, and from pornography on the Internet to the dangers of state censorship'. It has assumed, in other words, an extraordinary sense of transferability, and one whereupon many of Cohen's original complexities and equivocations are discarded (Innes, 2005: 108). When we add to this the adoption of the term 'moral panic' by the media and the almost casual reference with which journalists have come to use it to describe and predict many different forms and scales of social reaction (see Hier, 2002a; Jewkes, 2004; Thompson, 1998), the observation that the 'panic' concept is an elastic one and **'**lacks any precise theoretical grounding' (Munice, 1987: 45) may be described as astute. And it is one reflected and indeed reinforced by the reserve with which social theory has engaged with the concept in recent times (see Critcher, 2006: 20; Jewkes, 2004: 65). Accordingly, within the panic literature a call is repeated to look 'beyond' moral panic; to incorporate developments in social theory (such as Beck's 'risk society' and Foucault's 'discursive formations', see Critcher, 2003; Thompson, 1998) and go further than recent 'revisionist' efforts (de Young, 2004; McRobbie, 1994a; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995), which still remain tied to the inherent 'reliance on cognitive, behavioral, and normative measurement criteria' (Hier, 2008: 180) that have been present since Cohen's initial development of the concept.

Paradoxically, at the same time we can observe an impetus towards a defence of the concept as an abstraction, or 'ideal type', through which we might trace similarities between otherwise incongruent phenomena. For example, in *Moral Panics and the Media* (2003) Chas Critcher sets himself the task of testing this 'model of a process', to find '*constancies* in the model when applied to different examples' (Critcher, 2003: 2, emphasis added). However, one suspects that he is rigorously testing so as to come up

with *the* model (and, indeed, he adjusts Cohen's processual formulae with just one of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's attributes; dismissing the latter 'model' as vague and problematic overall).[1] It is our argument that such a defence merely serves to reinforce the premises upon which the 'elastic' assessment is founded. In this article, we wish to expound upon the first call (to go beyond moral panic as a heuristic device).

We begin by introducing some of the central problems with the moral panic concept. We then critically discuss Sean Hier's recent effort to 'rethink' panic by way of integrating it with developments in the sociologies of governance and of risk; Chas Critcher's recent publications, partly in reaction to Hier's conceptualization of moral panic, are then used to highlight some of the debates that exist within panic research. The final section of the article introduces the work of Norbert Elias and its application to the sociology of moral panic, suggesting that Elias's theory of civilizing and decivilizing processes, and his approach to sociology in general, can provide the means not only to theoretically develop the moral panic concept, but also to address some of the more substantial challenges that plague the foundations of moral panic: normativity, temporality, and (un)intentionality.

Problems

Normativity
From its inception (Young, 1971; Cohen, 1972) the moral panic concept has been used as a form of social critique; where panics are characterised as social reactions that are 'irrational' and, therefore, innately misdirected. 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 point [of 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).

Indeed, in a recent article Chas Critcher (2009: 32) has argued that the "intellectual project [of moral panic research] is also a political one"; where the judgment about the validity of the reaction as compared with the reality of the problem is seen to be the fundamental aim of moral panic research.

For Hier, (2002a: 312) this 'problem' of normativity explains why moral panic has been (and continues to be) seemingly unappealing to recent developments in social theory; in particular, to the literature on moral regulation (for example, Hunt, 1999; Moore and Valverde, 2000). In reaction to such criticisms, Critcher argues:

> …moral panic analysis is ultimately based on the view that social science has as one of its core functions an ability to assess the claims made about the status of a social problem or deviant group. This is never easy and always challenging but should not be abandoned". (Critcher, 2008: 1141).

However, it is our argument that this approach to panic research – where the whole point is to expose and to liberate – *pre*supposes that the reaction under investigation is

inherently misguided (as is evident with Cohen's discussion of 'good' and 'bad' panics, see Cohen, 2002: xxxi-xxxv). But this is not to say that moral panic research cannot be informative in that sense, as we will discuss later when examining the application of Elias to panic research. Whatever one's motive behind panic research, it is evident that this *is* a problem with regards to the continual theoretical development of the concept.

Temporality

Moral panics are typically conceptualised as temporary, short-term episodes. With the exception of a few (e.g. Hall et al., 1978; Jenkins, 1998), most panic studies are 'present-centred'; that is, they do not take account of the historically structured processes that feed into the panic[2]. Yet perhaps part of the focus on the 'event', in isolation, is related to our first problem: normativity. Here, the desire to debunk the reaction – to prove that it is 'misplaced', 'displaced' and 'tendentious' – may have contributed to a lessened inclination to look beyond the current episode. This is rather ironic considering that the criterion of disproportionality necessarily depends on a degree of a historical measure (for example, crime rates are *down* while fear of crime is *up*). However, Cohen's emphasis on the reactive processes and the prediction that such processes would repeatedly re-appear, in disparate times and spaces, does offer a sense of timelessness to panic, and a logic of transference across issues and events. This was unquestionably a key motivation behind both Hall et al.'s (1978) extension of the concept into a Marxist sociology, and Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) revision of the concept subsequent to an examination of an array of case studies across time and space. Indeed, Goode and Ben-Yehuda point to an extended time-frame for analysis:

> …panics are not like fads, trivial in nature and inconsequential in their impact; they do not come and go, vanishing, as it were, without a trace. Even those that seem to end without impact often leave informal traces that prepare us for later panics. A close examination of the impact of panics forces us to take a more long-range view of things, to look at panics as social process rather than as separate, discrete, time-bound events. Moral panics are a crucial element of the fabric of social change. They are not marginal, exotic, trivial phenomena, but one key by which we can unlock the mysteries of social life (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 229).

Despite that these authors also attend to the oft-neglected aspect of moral panic – *why* panics come to an end, identifying that it is often with a repressive (though largely symbolic) change in law, which serves as an indication that *something has been done* to mitigate the behaviour in question (see also Critcher, 2003) – it is clear that their focus of study is in one direction: on the *impact,* or aftermath, of a panic and not on why, or how, it was produced (see Critcher, 2003: 26). This becomes problematic, for how can one determine the impact of a panic if one does not examine how the social problem in question may have been developing long-term *prior* to the panic? It is in this regard that Hier (2002a: 314) alerts us to Durkheim's (1895) warning: placing focus upon functional explanations may mean causal explanations are overlooked; a warning Hier notes as an irony to heed, given that it is a Durkheimian foundation upon which a moral panic epistemology is derived.

(Un)intentionality

A third problem of analyses of moral panic is the variation in accounts relating to responsibility. Cohen's (1972) moral panic, for example, is understood largely as an

unintended and unanticipated development, but with a particular emphasis on the role of the media in reinforcing a sense of expectancy and in giving shape to rumour and ambiguous situations. On the other hand, Hall et al.'s (1978) assessment of the mugging phenomenon revealed a *strategic* panic employed by elites to orchestrate hegemony and divert attention from a systemic (capitalist) crisis. In their analysis, the 'mugging' label and the actions of the control culture preceded the folk devils and the 'incidents'; a sequence of *intervention* revealing deviant action therein making for social reaction, this in an effort to re-direct social anxieties generated by the economic recession of the early 1970s.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) constructed the problem as a question of intentional actions *versus* unintentional developments. Interested in the dimensions of motive and responsibility, these scholars distinguish between *grassroots, interest group,* and *elite engineered* panics. The first model, the *grassroots* panic, suggests that while concern may manifest within other sectors such as the media or among political bodies, it is the deeply felt attitudes and sentiments of a broad area of lay society that respond in the first instance. The second model, the *interest group* panic, suggests the reaction as an outcome (intended or not) of efforts on behalf of particular interest groups and moral entrepreneurs who work to gain attention to a specific moral 'evil'. The latter model, the *elite engineered* panic, is the conscious and deliberate result of propaganda campaigns designed to avoid a genuine solution to a real structural problem whose presentation would undermine elite interests. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994: 134,143) further suggest that all three are to be seen as 'ideal types' that, when applied, will illustrate different aspects of a panic. Therefore, it is important not to reduce panic to one or another; for example, the grassroots model is naïve in isolation as it cannot account for how raw concerns are intensified and mobilised (that is, unintentional 'anxieties' require intentional 'directing'). However, despite Goode and Ben-Yehuda's assertions, one of the problems with such ideal types is that they can lead to the reduction of the complexity of panics to a 'type', as has been the case, for example, with the classification of Hall et al's analysis as an 'elite-engineered' (intentional) panic, and Cohen's analysis as an 'interest group' (unintentional) panic[3].

More recent assessments argue for a fuller appreciation of the plurality of reactions accompanying moral assertions (see Hier, 2002b; McRobbie, 1994a, 1994b; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995; de Young, 2004). These critical contributions are especially concerned with illustrating the resistance efforts and gains made against primary definitions and dominant claims, which demonstrate how the expansion of 'new moral minorities' serve not only as the contemporary oppositional political voice (as the distinction between the left and the right becomes almost indistinguishable), but also provides both the vehicle and the support networks through which folk devils can 'fight back'. What is more, the pessimism of the moral panic concept (the elite model especially) cannot imagine that the victims (folk devils) may celebrate this status as a right of generational passage, or that panic may be employed by various marketing outlets as 'priceless PR campaigns' (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995: 565). However, while these arguments complicate the empirical bases upon which the foundational models stand, they fall short of

reconstructing alternate means of explanation and theorisation (see Hier, 2008). As such, our concept remains a heuristic one.

Rethinking panic

We turn now to discussing two of the recent proposals for how we might 'reconstruct' panic with a view to both re-engage with social theory and address these core problems.

Sean Hier: Risk and regulation
Drawing from the sociologies of governance and of risk, Hier (2002a, 2008) argues we might view moral panics as volatile manifestations of the ongoing project of moral regulation, where we imagine the 'moral' as dispositions and practices that are constituted and naturalised through a process of a calling to employ in practices of 'care for the self'. Motivated by the difficulty to identify the point at which a reaction becomes 'irrational' (particularly when this is ascribed to collective behaviour), and contrary to the common utilization of panic as an 'ideology' or set of ideas that are imputed to serve as the foundation for collective behaviour (exemplified by the oft conflation of media attention with public hysteria), Hier problematizes the relation between the production of meaning and the function these meanings extend to. This is a *critical* conception of ideology, where placing emphasis on the content of particular configurations of discourse (that seek to resonate with the wider community) enables us to then examine the cause of social facts (Hier, 2002a).

Hier (2002a, 2008) contends that, under a neo-liberal means of governance, regulatory processes have found expression through proxies of risk, harm and personal responsibility: we are now asked to engage in responsible forms of personal *risk* management; a call to self conduct which sits in a dialectical position to a collective subject position of 'harmful others'. Hier (2008) offers the example of the discourses which call us (individually) to drink responsibly and how these are in tension with (and yet rely on) the discourses which represent the collective harm of the drunk driver. In other words, I will (it is my moral calling to) manage my drinking so as not to become the 'risky' other (harmful to the wider group), and to manage my activities to avoid becoming subject to such harm. However, I know of these duties *only through* the ethereal presence of the drunk driver.

However, the road upon which regulation travels is not always smooth as moral callings are not always heeded (or seen not to be heeded). At these conjunctions the abstract subject position is filled by identifiable person/s and the threat becomes more specific; he/she/they and it are then responded to through defensive (coercive) activities on behalf of the wider group. It is now a collective discourse of risk management which sits against an immediate and personalised dimension of harm; that is, the everyday dialectic (of individual risk management against the collective dimension of harm) is momentarily reversed. For Hier (2002a, 2008), these moments are our episodes of moral panic. But they are not to be seen as exceptional. He is at pains to note the unwritten code of conduct we allude to as moral is a flexible and contested one; dependent upon a

constellation of agents (not merely the state), where the moral code operates through multiple configurations of risk and responsibility that are bound by neither time nor space. Thus, 'moralisation' is conceptualised as a recurrent sequence of attempts to negotiate social life; a temporary 'crisis' of the 'code' (moral panic) is therefore far more routine than extraordinary.

In this way, Hier's conceptualisation particularly attends to the atypical nature of panics (irrationality), while also lessening the tension between structure (Hall et al.) and agency (Cohen) as he allows for the trajectory to commence upon, and be influenced by, one or a number of regulatory sources.[4] Moreover, his emphasis upon *how* individuals become subjects in a collective reaction allows his analysis of moral panic to divorce itself from a relying upon a pejorative judgement.

Normativity, temporality and the political project of moral panic
However, a problem with Hier's (2002a, 2008) argument, at least in terms of developing moral panic 'beyond the heuristic', is that his location of the volatile nature of moral panic within the wider field of moral regulatory processes that are common, general, and less than fantastic may simply permit it to be *further* transferable across time and space. Indeed, Critcher (2009: 24) responds that, while Hier's work is potentially innovative, there is a risk of "encompassing potentially *any* topic within its remit" (emphasis added), and thus better specification of the scope of moral regulation is needed whereupon we may clarify the boundaries between those issues that are merely dissident of regulatory discourses, and those that are more likely to erupt into full-blown panics.[5]

On the other hand, Critcher (2009: 27-32) argues that whether or not an issue can be defined as evil (and therefore is liable to become a moral panic) ultimately depends on whether it 'intrinsically lends itself to the definition' (say, it threatens the innocence of children) and on its 'intangible resonance' within the society in which it presents (say, where the protection of the innocent child is paramount). This would not only demand that the panic analyst is one who is located, situated and therefore culturally qualified to bestow an opinion on the appropriateness of the response to the event or issue in question, but would, in turn, assume that there is a vested interest in debunking the anticipated reaction (see Jenkins, 2009). What is more, a culturally situated argument eliminates the need to examine wider social and historical processes behind an issue's presentation simply by virtue of that qualification. We are thus reduced to, once again, making a *normative* assessment about a *temporal* problem.

What we may have is a danger of slipping into a divide of sorts, between panic assessments that are issue dependent (that is, those that seek to question a reaction to a particular issue or event, and are thus necessarily normative), and those that are concept focused (that is, assessments that are more committed to reformulating the *model* of moral panic, and thus begin from a relatively more 'objective' location). At this point in the debate, it appears that the connections to social theory are more viable from the latter. Hier's work for example (at this stage), does not allow space for social critique; he explicitly states that there should be no 'right/wrong' judgment made at all (see Greenberg & Hier, 2001: 580). But do we need to consider our research in such either/or

terms? Can our assessments be relatively non-normative, while at the same time allow for the possibility of a political aspect to research? An alternative, though related, approach to moral panic, one that may help to surmount this potential divide, can be found in the application of Norbert Elias's theory of civilizing and decivilizing processes.

Norbert Elias and Moral Panic:

Before we examine how the figurational approach of Norbert Elias may address the problems highlighted above, let us first outline how Elias's theory of civilizing and decivilizing processes can be applied to moral panic.

Elias's famous study, *The Civilizing Process* (2000)*,* explored the interrelationship between long-term changes in standards of behaviour and processes of state formation. He illustrated how the internal pacification of territories, with increasing central 'state' monopolization over the means of violence and taxation, in combination with increasing interdependence (from growing populations and increasing division of labour), exerted pressures towards changes in behaviour. In his examination of Western Europe from the Middle Ages, Elias identified long-term trends (with short-term fluctuations) towards increasing self-restraint, foresight and mutual identification, along with decreasing cruelty towards others (Elias, 2000). In other works, he also examined changes in modes of knowledge, with an identifiable long-term shift towards increasingly 'reality-congruent' (as opposed to magico-mythical) knowledge (Elias, 2007).

However, in his writing on civilizing processes, Elias argued that the process is neither unilinear nor inevitable: civilizing and *de*civilizing trends occur alongside one another, it is just a question of which trends come to dominate (Fletcher, 1997: 83; see also Elias, 1996). While decivilizing trends may be described as reversals of different part-processes within the process of civilization, decivilizing *processes* are not necessarily complete reversions (see Mennell, 1990; Pratt, 2005). It is this typology that has been used to apply Elias to moral panics; where panics are conceptualized as *short*-term, partial decivilizing processes that occur within (and partly as a result of) civilizing processes

Moral panics as decivilizing processes

Examining the processes that occur during a moral panic, Rohloff (2008) provides us with a direct comparison between Stephen Mennell's (1990) possible symptoms of decivilizing processes on the one hand, and possible symptoms/outcomes of moral panics (Cohen, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994) on the other. While decivilizing processes are described by Jonathan Fletcher (1997) as likely to occur where there is an *actual* increase in levels of danger (and an increase in the incalculability of danger), along with a decrease in the state's monopolization of the means of violence, with moral panics there need only be a *perceived*[6] increase in danger, with a perceived failure of the state to reduce those dangers. Elias (2000: 532) describes how "the armour of civilized conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as it once was." And so, during moral panics, "civilized" conduct may be affected. Here, we

may witness a decrease in mutual identification between the 'folk devils' and the 'rest of us', with a corresponding increase in cruelty and the potential for the re-emergence of violence into the public sphere. For example, panics over paedophiles have witnessed both the resurgence of vigilante movements (Critcher, 2002; Pratt, 2002a) and the (re)introduction of laws that would, at other times under other conditions, be viewed as 'uncivilized' (see Pratt 2002b, 2005). During such times of crisis (moral panics), we may also witness changes in modes of knowledge: a shift from increasing levels of detachment towards increasing levels of involvement, with a corresponding increasing susceptibility to 'wish fantasies' about means to alleviate the 'crisis'.

Short-term panics and long-term processes

While this provides us with an overview of the decivilizing trends that may occur during a moral panic *in the short-term*, we can also examine how wider, *long-term*, social processes affect the development of moral panics. Rather than merely applying decivilizing symptoms to a moral panic and determining that moral panics are indeed episodes of decivilization (much the same way as one might apply a heuristic moral panic model and term that a particular phenomena qualifies as a moral panic), the application of Elias to moral panics goes further than this.

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, moral panics occur partly as the outcome of civilizing processes – where processes of civilization contribute to decivilization. One example is the long-term civilization trend towards increased specialization and expertization of knowledge (that is, increased division of labour). This process, along with the technization of the dissemination of knowledge, has increasingly enabled the exaggeration and distortion of events (Cohen, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994), as well as the deamplification of events (Murphy, Dunning, & Williams, 1988). These processes – along with the increasing democratization of knowledge, which allows counterclaims to be voiced and heard – further contribute to the incalculability of danger.

Secondly, to attend to the problem of temporality with specific empirical examples, we can then explore how the specific panic (or panics) are affected by wider social processes specific to the given example under investigation (for the beginnings of such a suggested analysis, see Rohloff, 2010). The following questions could be asked of the relationship of short-term panics and long-term processes: how do *particular* social problems come to be defined as such, and develop into moral panics; how do *particular* groups of people come to be the foci of processes of 'disidentification'? [7] As well as tracing the long-term development of changes in understandings about, and regulation of, a particular social problem (for example: child abuse, drugs), perhaps a further avenue for exploration could be to trace the changes in relative power-ratios between groups (including established-outsider relations; see Elias and Scotson, 1994) and how this affects the development of moral panics, including exploring the different types of campaigns that accompany panics; that is, the degree to which the campaigns are exclusionary or inclusionary of the 'outsiders' (see Rohloff, 2008).

By exploring the relationship between short-term panics (including *intentional* campaigns to bring about changes in behaviour) and wider, *unplanned* social processes, we can also

attend to the problem of (un)intentionality. The historical element of a figurational approach to moral panic research could also include exploring *changing* power relations (see Elias, 1978: Ch. 3) and how this affects the development of moral panics. Elias argues that processes of civilization included long-term trends towards increasing functional democratization: with increased differentiation and interdependence, power ratios tend to become more even. We can witness this within moral panic research, where, as McRobbie and Thornton (1995) argue, folk devils are (generally) not as marginalized as they once were (see also Rohloff, 2008; Ungar, 2001).

Involvement and Detachment: Retaining (the potential of) the 'political project'
Having outlined how the application of Elias can be used to address the problems of temporality and (un)intentionality in moral panic research, we now return to the problem of normativity. To reiterate, how can we attend to the charge of normativity in moral panic research, while still allowing space for the 'political project'?

Elias was very critical of the intrusion of what he termed 'heteronomus valuations', into the social sciences especially. But instead of attempting the impossible task of 'value neutral' sociology, Elias used alternative terms and reformulated the problem as one of a *balance* between 'involvement' and 'detachment' (Elias, 2007; see also Kilminster, 2007; Mennell, 1998: 160, Figure 4), where research should be characterized by relatively greater levels of detachment.

Following Elias, a figurational approach, where 'the sociologist-as-participant [increasingly involved] must be able to stand back and become the sociologist-as-observer-and-interpreter [increasingly detached]' (Maguire, 1988: 190; see also Bloyce, 2004; Elias, 1978), is viewed as being more conducive to increasing the 'reality congruence' (and decreasing the 'fantasy content') of knowledge. To achieve this (relative) detachment, Eric Dunning (1992: 252-254) argues that figurationalists should:

> Explore connections and regularities, structures and processes for their own sake. By attempting as dispassionately as possible to contribute to knowledge rather than to help in the achievement of some short-term goal, you will increase your chances of avoiding bias as result of personal interests or because of your membership of or identification with a particular group or groups (Dunning, 1992: 253). [8]

With the example of moral panic, we can see how the short-term goal of highlighting disproportionality and, thus, 'proving' that the panic was 'tendentious' and 'misplaced' or 'displaced', may have contributed to a more involved and less detached analysis and, consequently, closed researchers to the possibility that panics may be more than merely 'bad', 'irrational', short-term aberrations. Indeed, Garland (2008) notes how the founders of moral panic (Cohen, Young), carrying out their research in the 1960s, were 'often culturally closer to deviants than to their controllers' (Garland, 2008: 19). This involvement, perhaps necessary for the initial development of the moral panic concept, was not accompanied (to the same degree) with a corresponding 'stepping back' and seeing panic from different perspectives.

As Dunning (1992: 252) explains, this process of stepping back involves '[locating] the objects of your research historically and in the wider system of social interdependencies

in which they are embedded. Simply trying to do this will force you into greater detachment'. And so we begin to see how the two problems of normativity and temporality are connected: perhaps the inherent normativity of moral panic has been exacerbated by the lack of long-term historical research on moral panic; of the situating of panics within long-term processes.

It is our argument that much conceptualizing of moral panic retains the assumption that the 'reaction' to a 'problem' is viewed as unwarranted. However, until one has researched any given 'panic', one cannot be sure of the 'appropriateness' of the reaction. Thus, the political project of moral panic must come *after* the research (if warranted), so as to ensure a lessened affect of one's own biases intruding into the research. That is, once the sociologist has carried out their research in a relatively detached manner, they can then use that knowledge garnered from the research to inform action toward whatever 'problem' they have been studying. However, as Elias and others have argued, this process has to be one step removed from the research (see also Quilley & Loyal, 2005).

This is not to say that Elias is *the* way to overcome the problems as outlined. Rather, we are instead arguing that the theories and conceptual tools provided by Elias (and subsequently developed by others) are *one way* to attempt this. Furthermore, that this example illustrates the potential theoretical-conceptual development that accompanies looking 'beyond moral panic'.

Conclusion: Beyond the Heuristic

For some, the flexibility of a loosely defined concept is valuable in acknowledging and conceptualising like phenomena under complex and changing social conditions (Brown, 2005; Critcher, 2003; Thompson, 1998). For others, the persistent problems within 'moral panic' research demonstrate a need to incorporate and/or align the heuristic device in and with social theory.

In this article, we have looked at two ways in which this is currently being realized: Hier's (2002a; 2008) conceptualising of moral panic as volatile episodes within long-term project of moral regulation; and Rohloff's (2008; 2010) conceptualising of panic as short-term decivilizing processes within long-term civilizing processes. Both approaches, as we have discussed, go some way to overcome the problems of normativity, temporality, and (un)intentionality that have persisted in panic research.

However, we would argue that this conjectural task must also be approached with some delicacy, whereupon we can *protect* (but not be restrained by) the political underpinnings of the traditional moral panic project at the same time as we seek to imagine how the model can be connected to theory. This is crucial to avoid the prospect of a division into issue dependent 'cases' and concept focused assessments. Thus far, we have averred, it is Elias's figurational sociology that is most concomitant to such a route.

Fundamentally, further empirical research is critically needed, research that aims to strike a balance between theoretical development *and* empirical investigation – where theory

informs empirical investigation and that investigation, in turn, informs theoretical development. As Elias (1956: 241) aptly puts it: '…an uninterrupted two-way traffic between two layers of knowledge: that of general idea, theories or models and that of observations and perceptions of specific events'. In this way we may move *beyond* the ritualistic application of Cohen's 'stages' and develop moral panic whereupon we can inform, and continue to be informed by, movements and developments in social theory.

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NOTES

[1] Though the distinction between Cohen's (1972) study of reactive and interactive phenomena and Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) approach in terms of social constructionism and collective behaviour is usually clear, Critcher (2003) conceptualises the former as a model of *processes*; the latter as a model of identifiable criteria (*attributes*: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility).

[2] Cohen's (2002) defence is that although panics may be initiated (and sustained) by wider political and social forces, this does not mean that they do not have their own internal trajectories that can be the matter for study, and, further, that a panic by *definition* is temporary and spasmodic, especially if we are taking into particular account media formats and cycles (a view echoed by Critcher, 2003)

[3] This is not to say that 'interest group' panics do not entail intentional actions. Rather, the *panic* is regarded as an unintentional outcome of intentional crusades.

[4] In this way, he indirectly recognises Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) grassroots, interest group, and elite models of panic.

[5] Critcher (2008) suggests a dimensional categorisation based upon how an issue is discursively constructed; as a threat to basic values (the moral order dimension), the extent to which there is a proposed solution (the social order dimension), and the

regulation of others insofar as it requires the ethical formation of the self (the governmentality dimension). Those issues that score high on the first two (child sexual abuse, violent crime, asylum seeking) are potential panics; issues such as smoking, obesity, and sexually transmitted diseases score high only on the third, and as such are not likely to generate the same language of evil; their perpetrators less subject to the same degree of social expulsion.

[6] Following Ungar, Hier and other critics, we would argue that this is not to say that the concept of moral panic *necessitates* a disproportionate reaction to a perceived social problem.

[7] Indeed, Critcher (2009: 24) argues that this is the challenge for new empirical works; to consider which groups/individuals are identified as the source of harm – when, and why.

[8] Exploring 'as dispassionately as possible' through a 'detour via detachment' should not be confused with 'emotionless rationality'. Rather, the aim is for 'passion' associated with 'heteronomous evaluations' to be replaced (though never absolutely) with increasingly *controlled* 'passion' associated with the pursuit of a more reality congruent knowledge (Kilminster, 2007: 121-123).