

'DO WE LOOK LIKE BOY RACERS?' THE ROLE OF THE FOLK DEVIL IN CONTEMPORARY MORAL PANICS

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CONTEXT

Stanley Cohen's book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), argued that, every now and then societies seem to be subject to periods of what he calls 'moral panic'.

This means that an activity or group of persons is defined by the mass media as a threat to societal values and interests. The media report this so-called 'threat' in a sensationalised, exaggerated and stereotypical fashion, thereby increasing levels of social anxiety and greatly increasing the visibility of the stigmatised group. Members of the group are viewed as

'folk devils' in need of social control. Lumsden notes that in contemporary Western society car cultures are an increasingly popular leisure pursuit amongst adolescents. Such cultures in the UK are sometimes referred to as 'boy racers'. She argues that the image of a young male driving a modified car with a spoiler, alloys, lowered suspension,

and a loud exhaust and stereo system has seeped into the public imagination. In Aberdeen, where the research is based, Lumsden claims that a moral panic has been constructed around the boy-racer culture and as a result participants in this subculture have been unfairly labelled as deviant folk devils by the authorities and the local media.

LINKS TO KEY DEBATES

This study links particularly well to the work of Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) who argue that moral panics have five key elements: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility. All these characteristics can be seen in the media coverage of boy racers in Aberdeen.

Moreover, young people are the group most likely to become the subject of moral panics. Categories of youth such as 'punks', 'ravers', 'chavs', 'hoodies' and 'skinheads' are similar in their function to 'boy racers' in that all these groups have been portrayed by the media as disorderly, dangerous and anti-social.

Lumsden's study also recognises that the social construction of a moral panic is a collective process involving the media, the authorities, the general public and the young people themselves. She draws our attention to the fact that studies of moral panics often fail to take into account the reaction of those individuals who are the focus of moral panics, i.e. the folk devils themselves. Members of the subculture were aware of their negative portrayal in the media but their attempts to change the myth of the 'boy racer' were unsuccessful.

METHODS

Lumsden adopted a multi-strategy approach to her research. She gained access to the boy racer subculture through two gatekeepers, 'Debbie' and 'Robert', who introduced her to the scene and to other members of the subculture. Once she had gained access, she used ethnographic methods that allowed her an in-depth look at the everyday lives of the subculture. She specifically adopted the role of overt participant observer and spent 150 hours in total with the group over a one-year period (2006-07). This fieldwork involved spending weekends at Aberdeen Beach, the main venue of the boy racers, attending car shows, socialising with members of

the group and accompanying them to scrapyards and shops to search for car parts. She also used websites created and used by members of the subculture as a source of data.

Lumsden's research also consisted of semi-structured interviews with members of the subculture which were recorded and transcribed. Eight members of the subculture were interviewed, in addition to one former member of the subculture. Interview questions were written up in advance of each interview. However, the context of the interview was such that respondents were allowed to deviate from the interview schedule in order to discuss other

issues which they felt were relevant.

Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with four police officers, a local councillor, the local Member of Parliament, three journalists, two council officials and two local residents. She also carried out a focus group interview with four residents.

Finally, she collected secondary data in the form of more than 200 local and national media articles which focused on the boy-racer subculture in Aberdeen. These were collected over a four-year period from five local newspapers and were analysed in terms of the headlines and language used to describe the boy-racer subculture.

KEY FINDINGS

Lumsden found that the mass media had presented the subculture of boy racers in the form of a moral panic for the first time in 2000 and, as a result, newspaper coverage had been negative for nearly seven years.

She noted that the mode and style of presentation of media reports were characteristic of crime reporting. This included sensational headlines and melodramatic vocabulary. For instance, local media articles reported that there were 'scores of young drivers'. Their driving was also exaggerated by references to 'excessive' or 'extreme' speeds, and 'roaring' or 'madly revved' engines. Phrases and words were also used to exaggerate the action taken against the 'boy racers'. Anti-social behaviour had to be 'slashed'. Measures were portrayed as a war or battle with residents 'celebrating victory' over the 'boy racers'.

Police operations were referred to as a 'blitz', 'campaign' or 'crackdown'.

Lumsden argues that this moral panic created myths around the boy racers. Most of the participants in the boy-racer subculture actually viewed themselves as 'respectable' car enthusiasts who merely wanted to socialise with each other and discuss cars. They took pride in their driving and their adherence to the laws of the road. They were aggrieved that the media had seized upon the activities of a 'few idiots who spoil it for the rest of us' to label the whole subculture as a social problem.

EVALUATION

Lumsden's use of secondary data in the form of media reports certainly mirrors the findings of other studies of moral panics. However, her study suffers from the same problems as those other studies. Different sociologists may interpret media headlines and language in different ways, and we have therefore to assume that her interpretation does provide evidence of the characteristics of a moral panic. Her interpretation might have more validity if she had verified these characteristics using the results of her interviews with police officers and journalists, or if she had directly observed some of the incidents reported in the media.

Lumsden experienced some problems in obtaining access to the boy-racer subculture. Some members were unwilling to cooperate because they were suspicious of her motivations. She concedes that her interviews were generally unsuccessful and that it proved easier to collect data on participants' opinions and viewpoints via informal chats that took place during the participant observation.

She notes that respondents may have feared being negatively labelled and, consequently, they were keen to emphasise that they were not involved in deviant activities. This possibility may undermine the validity of her data. It is noticeable that she only seemed to have talked to, and observed, the more 'respectable' members of the subculture. She does not seem to have gained access to the more deviant members or observed them in action.

FIND OUT MORE

Lumsden, K. (2009) 'Do We Look Like Boy Racers? The Role of the Folk Devil in Contemporary Moral Panics'. *Sociological Research Online*, Volume 14:1 www.socresonline.org.uk/14/1/2.html

Cohen, S. (2002, originally 1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 3rd edn. London: Routledge

Goode, E. and Ben-Yehuda, N. (1994) *Moral Panics*. Oxford: Blackwell

ACTIVITIES: 'DO WE LOOK LIKE BOY RACERS?' THE ROLE OF THE FOLK DEVIL IN CONTEMPORARY MORAL PANICS

Vocabulary list

Here is a list of some words and phrases used in the summary. Below are the definitions of those words and phrases. Match the word or phrase to the correct definition.

Word/phrase	Meaning
1. Folk devils	
2. Moral panic	
3. Stigmatised	
4. Multi-strategy approach	
5. Gatekeepers	
6. Ethnography	
7. Overt	
8. Fieldwork	
9. Semi-structured interview	
10. Transcribed	
11. Focus group	
12. Secondary data	
13. Myths	
14. Disproportionality	
15. Volatility	

Definitions

- The capacity to change rapidly
- Approach to research involving a range of qualitative and/or quantitative methods
- A word-for-word record taken
- Interviews with some fixed questions and topics but also giving the interviewer flexibility to adapt and change questioning in the light of responses
- Not representing the true extent of something – exaggerated
- An activity or group are defined by the media as a threat to social values
- Individuals who allow the researcher access to the individuals and/or groups they want to study
- Type of research involving the researcher using qualitative methods to get close to a group and see things from their point of view
- Information already in existence
- Typically a group of people identified by the media as a threat to social order
- A well known story which is not based on fact
- Researching in the place where the group or situation being studied is to be found
- Open, known to everyone
- Group interview, usually using a list of topics to cover
- To be viewed negatively

True or false?

Decide whether the statements below are true or false. Then check your answers by looking at the study. Add the correct information and/or more detail in the right-hand column.

Statement	✓	✗	Comment
1. A moral panic occurs when the media report a social problem in a balanced and impartial way	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Lumsden argues that a moral panic has been created around 'boy racers'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Participant observation was the only method used in the research	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Lumsden let the group know that she was a sociologist	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Eight members of the subculture were interviewed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. Local journalists were interviewed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. 10 articles from local and national media were analysed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8. The mass media had first presented the subculture as a moral panic in 2000	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
9. Most of the participants in the subculture saw themselves as rebels and outlaws	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. Lumsden verified her interpretations by actually observing some of the incidents reported in the media	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
11. All members of the subculture were comfortable with the idea of being interviewed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
12. Lumsden interviewed a representative sample of the subculture	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Answers to True or False quizzes at end of book

Questions

The study

1. Suggest three other groups that might be considered to have been labeled as 'folk devils'.
2. In what ways could media reporting of the 'boy racer' subculture in Aberdeen be considered characteristic of a moral panic?
3. How did participants in the subculture view themselves?
4. Suggest how each of Goode and Yehuda's five elements of a moral panic be applied to media coverage of the 'boy racer' subculture.
5. In what ways is the construction of a moral panic a 'collective process'.

The methods

6. Suggest reasons why Lumsden used a multi-strategy approach.
7. What were the advantages and disadvantages of Lumsden taking an overt role in her observation?
8. Assess the reliability and validity of Lumsden's research.

Methods in context question

Item A

Lumsden claims that a moral panic has been constructed in Aberdeen around the boy-racer culture and, as a result, participants in this subculture have been unfairly labelled as deviant folk devils by the authorities and the local media.

Lumsden adopted a multi-strategy approach to her research. She used ethnographic methods to look at the everyday lives of the subculture. She specifically adopted the role of overt participant observer and spent 150 hours in total with the group over a one-year period. She also used websites created and used by members of the subculture as a source of data.

Lumsden's research also consisted of semi-structured interviews with members of the subculture, four police officers, a local councillor, the local Member of Parliament, three journalists, two council officials and two local residents. She also carried out a focus group interview with four residents.

Finally, she collected secondary data in the form of more than 200 local and national media articles that focused on the boy-racer subculture in Aberdeen. These were collected over a four-year period from five local newspapers and were analysed in terms of the headlines and language used to describe the boy-racer subculture.

Using material from Item A and elsewhere, assess the strengths and limitations of using a multi-strategy approach to investigate a moral panic. (15 marks)

Mark scheme for methods in context question

b. Using material from Item A and elsewhere, assess the strengths and limitations of using a multi-strategy approach to investigate a moral panic. (15 marks)

- 0** No relevant points
- 1-5** Answers in this band will show limited knowledge and understanding and will have only limited success in interpreting, applying, analysing and evaluating material to meet the demands of the question.
- Lower in the band**, one or two inconsequential commonsensical points about a multi-strategy approach with minimal or no elaboration.
- Higher in the band**, one or two relevant, vaguely sociological, undeveloped points may be made, for instance, about the advantages of combining qualitative and quantitative data.
- 6-11** Answers in this band will show reasonable knowledge and understanding and will have some success in interpreting, applying, analysing and evaluating material to meet the requirements of the question.
- Lower in the band**, answers will identify a limited number of relevant strengths and/or limitations of a multi-strategy approach, and will tend to list rather than analyse or evaluate the material presented. Much material may not be interpreted and applied to the specific demands of the question, e.g. making general comments about a multi-strategy approach without linking these to studies of moral panics.
- Higher in the band**, answers will show a range of material and/or greater tendency to discuss rather than list points. There will be some reference to both strengths and limitations. Material will be interpreted accurately; some material will be applied to specific issues raised by the question, but some will be applied in a more generalised way, e.g. the answer may succeed in focusing on a multi-strategy approach, but some of this may be applied to the study of crime and deviance in general, not to the specifics of studying moral panics. There may be some limited use of the Item and there will be some limited explicit analysis and/or evaluation.
- 12-15** Answers in this band will show sound knowledge and understanding and will be largely successful in interpreting, applying, analysing and evaluating material to meet the requirements of the question. Answers in this band will examine a range of strengths and limitations in using a multi-strategy approach to investigate a moral panic, using material from the Item and elsewhere. For example, these may include ethical issues (dealing with discussion of illegal or unacceptable activities, confidentiality/anonymity), practical issues (identifying a sample, gaining access, balance of different methods, period in the field, establishing rapport with different stakeholders, status differences between researcher and the participants) and theoretical issues (triangulation, validity/insight, reliability, role of hypothesis or grounded theory in mixed-methods research). Such issues will be clearly linked to the study of moral panics. Analysis and/or evaluation will be relevant, explicit and well developed, e.g. by locating the discussion within a theoretical debate or by making contrasts with other methods.

Note: answers do not need to include all of the above, even to score full marks.