

The Coverage of Lone-Parents in British Newspapers

A Construction Based on Moral Panic?

OLGA LINNÉ & MARSHA JONES

This article presents a systematic content analysis of coverage of lone-parents in 1993 and 1997 in the British press and examines other acts of deviance and their coverage by the media to produce moral panics. It also analyses models and criteria of moral panics, and relates these to the media coverage of lone-parents in Britain. Cohen argues as early as 1972 that a moral panic occurs as people become aware of a specific group as a result of media coverage. Public concern is expressed for ways of dealing with the group. The media and the public call for increased controls by the authorities. In Britain the increased number of lone-parent families has given rise to both political and media concern over the recent past and formed a significant factor in the 'Back to Basics' morality drive of the Conservatives and the public worries of the Blair's 'Cool-Britannia' New Labour. However, although there is a considerable interest from politicians and coverage in newspapers about the lone-parent family, there has been no empirical studies carried out about the nature of this portrayal.

Although the previous Tory government under Mrs Thatcher had expressed some concern over the need to return to 'Victorian values', the government under John Major took up the issue more deliberately. In 1993, various government ministers issued statements to the effect that traditional family values were under attack, and at the annual party conference John Major used the term, 'Back to Basics'.

This viewpoint was clearly expressed in the verse of Peter Lilley, Social Security Minister, at the Tory Party Conference in 1992:

*Centre for Mass Communication Research,
University of Leicester, 104 Regent Road, Leicester
LE1 7LT, oli@leicester.ac.uk*

I've got a little list, of benefit offenders, who never will be missed. No they never will be missed. There's young ladies who get pregnant just to jump the housing queue...

As well as Lilley, other Tory MPs gave their support as the following quote demonstrates:

How do we explain to the young couple who want to wait for a home before they start a family that they cannot be housed ahead of the unmarried teenager expecting her first, probably unplanned child? – Sir George Young, Minister for Housing. (*The Guardian*, 9 November 1993)

Moral Panics

There has been a history of public panics in our society and it is interesting to see that the concept has become a part of common usage. It was used first by Jock Young (1971) with reference to the reaction to drug takers in Notting Hill, but it is more generally associated with his colleague, Stanley Cohen, (1972) who defined it as follows:

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... (Cohen, 1972: 9).

A moral panic is to be recognised by the intensity of feeling which is expressed by a large number of people about a specific group who appear to threa-

ten the social order at a given time. This group become the “folk-devils” and it is immediately evident that “something needs to be done” about them. This “something” is usually in the form of increased social controls which might be stricter laws, longer sentences, heavier fines, increased policing of specific areas. After the imposition of these new controls, the panic subsides until a new one emerges. It is interesting to analyse the contexts of moral panics because they invariably occur when powerful interests groups in society are facing troubled times. (Jones and Jones, 1999)

A classic example of this is the ‘mugging’ panic of the 1970s. At the time British capitalism was facing a series of threats: strikes, disturbances in the inner cities and the activities of the IRA in Northern Ireland. In order to divert the attention of the public away from this crisis, it is argued that the agents of social control exaggerated the threat posed by a relatively insubstantial offence, street crime, gave it a new label, “mugging”, and a new moral panic was created. (Hall et al, 1978). The same phenomenon occurred in Renaissance Europe when “witches” were seized upon as the major threat to society when it was, in fact, Catholicism which was being threatened by the Protestant Reformation (Ben Yehuda, 1980).

Characteristics of a Moral Panic

It is possible to find some common ground on what constitutes a moral panic. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) outline what they see as the five main features of any moral panic: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility. We will later analyse these concepts in relation to the portrayal of lone-parent families.

Concern

There must be some awareness that the behaviour of a particular group or category is likely to have negative consequences for the rest of society. This gives rise to public concern which may be shown through public opinion polls, but significantly, through media coverage

Hostility

There must be increased hostility directed at this group, and they may be referred to as the enemy of respectable society. They become the folk-devils and a clear division opens up between ‘them’, the threateners, and ‘us’, the threatened.

Consensus

There must be fairly widespread acceptance that the threat posed by this group is a very real one to the rest of society. The consensus does not necessarily have to be nation-wide, but it is important that the moral entrepreneurs are vocal and that the voices of the opposition are weak and disorganised.

Disproportionality

It is implicit in the term that the societal reaction to the event is out of proportion. In moral panics, the public is given evidence in statistical form and these figures are important, and often wildly exaggerated. We have had statistics of drug-addicts, attacks, victims, injuries, illnesses etc. which are disproportionate to the actual threat exercised by the group or category. The latest panic over ‘air-rage’ incidents exemplifies this.

Volatility

Moral panics as the term implies are volatile. Any moral panic has a limited ‘shelf-life’, although it might lie dormant over a long period of time and might also reappear at different historical periods. For instance the panic over satanic ritual abuse which appeared in the 1980s had Medieval antecedents in witchcraft accusations and trials. Generally, they erupt suddenly and as quickly subside. However, whether there is long-term impact or not, the degree of public hostility generated during a moral panic is relatively short-lived. It is difficult to sustain a fever pitch level of antagonism for any length of time, public interest may wane or the agenda-setters of news media change the focus of attention.

The following demonstrates the assumed progress of a moral panic (Cohen 1972):

- A group commit an unpopular or deviant act.
- The media report the story as ‘interesting’: a problem group becomes identified.
- The media search for similar stories, sensationalise and exaggerate their significance. Causes are not analysed in any depth. Easy targets for blame are located.
- The original group or category becomes the folk-devil(s) and fear of them is encouraged.
- More deviance occurs as this group is further marginalised. Media interest is heightened.

- A moral panic occurs as people become aware of the group as a result of media coverage. Public concern is expressed for ways of dealing with the group. The media and the public call for increased controls by the authorities.
- More social control is introduced. Politicians, police, magistrates respond by invoking harsher measures to clamp down on the deviants. New laws may be introduced.

Muncie (1987) argues that the moral panic thesis not only allows us to identify instances of media exaggeration and distortion, but also demonstrates that selective reporting by the media can be instrumental in actually generating crime waves and social problems. In this way the agencies of social control actively generate more deviance as a result of the process of the moral panic. This is often referred to as deviancy amplification, because as people “pre-disposed to the initial illegal activity may gravitate to the places where reporting is taking place, thus actually increasing the incidence of the phenomenon.” (Lawson and Garrod, 1996:9). Despite the phenomenon reported being something that has existed over a long period, the media’s attention invokes public concern. People start to ask ‘what is to be done about x?’ and we enter a social process whose eventual outcome is likely to be legislative change, which is often repressive rather than restitutive.

The use of the concept of the ‘moral panic’ by Cohen lies within the perspectives of interactionism, labelling and anomie, i.e. it can be encompassed by deviancy theory. However, Hall et al placed it within a different tradition. Critical of the interactionist perspective for its lack of an examination of power relations, instead they placed the concept within a clear hegemonic framework of relations between the State, law and social class. (Hall et al, 1978)

For Hall et al, the moral panic was a means of distracting attention away from several crises within the capitalist state. Moral panics form part of a legitimising process for identifying enemies within, while at the same time strengthening the powers of the state. This ensured that the law and order debate would be promoted without public understanding of the social divisions and conflicts which helped to produce the deviance and political conflict (Muncie, 1987). The mugging panic resulted in the imposition of more military-style policing in the inner cities.

We are now going to look at some contemporary examples of public issues which might be catego-

rised as moral panics. It is interesting to note that the moral panics of the 1990s may not simply a continuation of the historical pattern of panics. The most recent do not simply focus on ‘marginalised’ groups such as the ‘black mugger’, ‘the drug addict’ or ‘promiscuous teenagers’, but they also cover a whole range of individuals. No-one feel completely safe from possible attack as a result of a future panic. It is this change in what may be described as the ‘risk’ society which has led to a re-appraisal of the concept.

Child Sexual Abuse

The issue of child sexual abuse was frequently reported in the press throughout the 1990s. There were specific cases of organised abuse reported in the Orkneys, in Manchester and Nottingham, which were given wide media coverage. Kitzinger and Skidmore (1995) examined the media coverage of child sexual abuse during 1991, the period when the Orkney case was dominant. They were interested in the process of news production and the extent to which the issue of child sexual abuse, (CSA) could be seen as a moral panic. They found that social workers came in for most negative coverage; the difficulties and success of child protection work were rarely discussed. Instead the, reporting of CSA in 1991 was about cases and intervention and rarely about the underlying causes of abuse, how to prevent it or the help that is, or should be available to survivors. (Skidmore, 1995)

Child abuse is linked to domestic violence in general, and as Clarke shows, the New Right has tended to argue that abuses against women and children are symptomatic of the current crisis in the family caused by a decline in morality and family values this century. Others, however, believe that rather than any absolute increase in family violence, we are witnessing a classic ‘moral panic’, an upsurge of public and expert attention towards a phenomenon which for many years had been neglected (Clarke, 1997).

Satanic Child Abuse

Linked to fears of organised child sexual abuse was the concern over ritual ‘Satanic’ abuse of children. Satanic abuse implies that there is some kind of ritualistic sexual abuse (of children) directed to worship of the devil. In the early 1980s, a belief began to take hold that many hundreds or even, thousands of children were at risk of being sexually assaulted or even murdered by satanic worshippers.

This was the subject of much heart-searching in Britain by media professionals, social workers and sociologists. ‘Survivor’ stories were printed in the press and chat show hosts interviewed several people who claimed that they had been victims of satanic cults. What is so interesting is why such stories should have been believed in the first place, given that the stories were so unlike ‘real life’ involving as they did, the devil and his followers.

An enquiry into alleged cases was undertaken by la Fontaine (1994). The study utilised a range of methods including postal surveys of police, social services and the NSPCC; secondary analysis of files, and detailed case studies of reported cases.

Despite interviews with self-professed Satanists and victims alike, there was no concrete evidence produced that ritual satanic abuse had ever taken place. When the panic subsided, it was discovered that the whole episode had been started as a result of a training programme for social workers which had been led by a group of American Christian fundamentalists. The victims of the moral panic remain the many children who were snatched from so-called ‘dangerous’ homes and placed in care, and their parents who were accused of the ritual abuse.

The moral panic over satanic abuse also qualifies as persecution (Jones and Jones, 1999:148). Persecutions have been defined as “severe repressive actions” as a result of “an almost obsessive public fear of the dangers emanating from” a particular group of people. (Goode and Ben Yehuda, 1994:112)

It is easy to see why satanic abuse was taken up as an explanation of child abuse. People are often reluctant to believe that parents could do such things to their own children whereas some involvement with external or ‘evil’ forces can help to explain it. “The notion that unknown, powerful leaders control the cult revives an old myth of dangerous strangers. Demonising the marginal poor and linking them to unknown Satanists turns intractable cases of abuse into manifestations of evil.” (la Fontaine, 1994 :31)

The USA Drug Panic of the Late 1980s

What is interesting about this panic was its unexpectedness, coming as it did after relatively liberal attitudes to illegal soft drugs throughout the 1970s. Drug abuse did not appear on opinion polls between 1979 and 1984, but in 1986, it was named as the nation’s number one problem. In September 1989, it was cited by 64 percent of the respondents

for a New York Times Survey, by November the figure had dropped to 38 percent.

Why did the escalation occur? Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) argue that there were several contributory factors. These included the introduction and urban use of crack cocaine in late 1985; the death of two popular athletes from cocaine overdoses in June 1986 and the ensuing coverage of these deaths by the national media. Other factors all played a part: the essentially conservative political climate during the 1980s under Ronald Reagan and the 1986 Congressional Election – the bandwagon effect of talk about drugs amongst senators. Nancy Reagan began making speeches stressing the dangers of drugs, she coined the ‘Just say no’ slogan. News stories appeared which focused on crack-addicted babies which gave rise to a public outcry against drug abusing women passing the addiction to their babies.

Was the drug crisis a moral panic? Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s answer is a ‘qualified yes’ (1994: 222), but there was no ensuing increase in measurable chronic use accompanying the increase in public concern. However, drug use became the major ‘problem’ of USA cities, and the concern was volatile, moving off the centre-stage agenda in the early 1990s.

‘Back to Basics’: The Lone-Parent Family

Having briefly examined some examples of past moral panics, we now turn to the major focus of the research reported here: *media coverage of the lone-parent family*.

The family, usually taken to mean the nuclear or ‘cereal packet’ family is never out of our collective consciousness. Families are part and parcel of our daily media diet whether reporting in salacious detail by the tabloids, if they happen to be hapless Royals or other ‘media celebrities’, or, as familiar friends and neighbours in soaps and situation comedies on our television screens.

But what do we really know about families in Britain today? Nowadays, families are characterised by diversity and change: there are fewer first marriages, increasing remarriages, divorce has become a commonplace and we have experienced new forms of family structure, the reconstituted family, childless families and gay parenting (Jones and Jones, 1999: 149).

Concern over inadequate families focused in previous years on the lower working class. From the 1980s onwards, however, political attention

was concentrated upon lone-parent families. The lone-parent family came under scrutiny by media professionals and politicians after the analysis by Charles Murray (1996) on the nature of the 'underclass'. Comparing the British situation with that of the USA, Murray referred to the 'underclass' as reproducing hordes of illegitimate children who had no investment in the future and who were likely to face a life of crime. He called them the 'lost generation'. He outlined the need for moral regeneration and social stigmatization of lone-parents. The significance of Murray's pronouncement was that it was reported at length in *The Sunday Times* (26 November 1989). Contemporary societal ills were blamed on the fecklessness of the one-parent family. It became part of the demonology of the New Right, supported in part by some mainstream sociologists, Dennis (1993) who, although espousing Ethical Socialism, nevertheless, adopted the agenda of the Tory politicians and began to research the phenomenon of the dysfunctional lone-parent family.

Were lone-parent families, usually young and working class, and frequently housed in council accommodation, to become another folk-devil? As Michael Portillo, then Chief Secretary to the Treasury said: "Teenage pregnancy often leads to a whole life of state dependency" (*The Times*, 1993, 15 September).

The ensuing legislation introduced the now, much-criticised, Child Support Agency. Its function was to locate errant fathers who were failing to provide adequate maintenance for their abandoned families, who had become in the public consciousness a burden on the state. However, the Conservatives themselves became less overtly critical as several senior MPs and ministers were discovered themselves to have flouted basic family values and were caught out in extra-marital relationships. Some, were even found to have fathered illegitimate children, hence producing more lone-parent families.

Morgan (1994) has referred to the way in which private troubles, such as those experienced by lone-parents, have become matters of public consumption through a process of amplification. A politician may make references to single parents in a speech at a party conference, perhaps drawing upon some statistical surveys. The press will not simply report this speech, but will provide its own experts and often supply more human interest stories of its own. Other opinion leaders or experts may be brought in to comment on this process. Secondly, if

there are causal relationships involved; it is clear here that the lone-parent family is attributed with the responsibility for generating delinquency and other forms of moral degeneracy. Finally, if linked with the second reason, they are seen as symptoms of a general social malaise, indicating a breakdown in community or wider societal values.

Morgan (1994) also maintains that the processes by which single mothers became constructed as a social problem involved the relationship between political speeches and media accounts which included both political references and press reportage. He argued that the lone-parent family has been constructed as a potential threat to wider family values and as an indication of a decline in moral standards especially amongst the working class.

Press Coverage of Lone-Parent Articles

In July 1993 John Redwood, then Cabinet Minister and Welsh Secretary, visited a housing estate in South Wales. Commenting on the large numbers of lone mothers, he voiced his concern: "for young women to have babies with no apparent intention of even trying marriage or a stable relationship with the father of the child" (*The Daily Mirror*, 1993, 3 July). He said that absentee fathers had to be tracked down and made to contribute to the support of their families, thus saving the State financially. It was Redwood's comments which triggered the first content analysis.

We chose two broadsheet newspapers: *The Guardian* and *The Times*. In this analysis we were interested in simply studying the patterns of reporting. At this stage our focus was the frequency of reporting from January 1993 to September 1993. There was no great significance in the length of the study, we were just interested covering a substantial period.

During this period *The Guardian* ran 118 and *The Times* 77 relevant articles. July 1993 was the month when most stories were published, there were 30 in *The Guardian* and 34 in *The Times* respectively. This was the month of John Redwood's speech on single parents.

Apart from July 1993, *The Guardian* carried more stories than did *The Times*. Two trends became apparent. The first that the lone-parents issue had been reported during several months and did not suddenly explode in July 1993. The second was that although *The Guardian* wrote about the issue more frequently over the year, *The Times* mentioned it more during the month of July 1993. The

Times' editorials supported the Tory Party during this period and as we will see, more Tory than Labour politicians were mentioned during July.

Coverage in July 1993

We carried out a more detailed content analysis specifically on July 1993 on four newspapers: *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*, as this was the month when most interest was expressed. Our choice of newspapers was based on two criteria:

- a) broadsheet quality newspapers as compared with tabloids.
- b) the different political affiliations of the papers at the time.

The Guardian and The Daily Mirror were chosen, as we regarded them as less supportive of the Conservatives than were The Times and The Sun. (Since then these latter newspapers have openly supported the Labour Party under Tony Blair's premiership).

There were seventy-one stories in total which treated 'lone-parents' as a main story.

Table 1. Number of Articles Reporting on Lone-Parents (1993)

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
The Guardian	30	42
The Times	34	48
The Sun	5	7
The Daily Mirror	2	3
Total	71	100

We found that lone-parents were more frequently reported in the two quality papers than in the tabloids.

The Guardian and The Times carried 42 percent and 48 percent of the stories respectively in July 1993, while The Sun carried seven percent and the Daily Mirror only three percent of the stories. This is contradictory to any hypothesis that assumes a media war against lone-parents would be led by the tabloid press.

Most of the seventy-one stories were published on inside pages (39%) rather than as front or back page news stories demonstrating that editors did not regard the issues as important enough for the front page. In fact only six percent of the stories made it on to the front pages.

Table 2. Type of Article (1993)

Type	Frequency	Percent
Main news story (front page)	4	6
Other front page story	1	1
Non-front/no-back news story	28	39
Feature	16	23
Columnist	4	4
Editorial	7	10
Letter	11	16
Total	71	99

Who Were the Actors in 1993?

We analysed who the main actors portrayed were in the stories, i.e. were they lone-parents, politicians or any other interest group?

Table 3. Actors Portrayed (1993)

Actors portrayed	Frequency	Percent
Lone-parents	73	31
Politicians	67	29
Children	38	16
Fathers	24	10
Clergy	8	3
Social Agencies	7	3
Women Activists/Feminists	6	3
Law and Order	6	3
Married mothers	3	1
Journalist	1	0
Total	233	99

Out of the 233 actors portrayed, 31 percent were the lone-parents themselves, most often referred to as "single parents". The next most frequently referred group as the main actor was politicians (29%). The next groups mentioned were children (16%) and fathers (10%).

Married mothers were only mentioned in one percent of the cases and had an even lower profile than women activist and feminists (3%).

It is interesting to note that out of the 29 percent of politicians portrayed, 78 percent were Tories compared with only 20 percent Labour politicians. There was no reference at all to Liberal politicians, but one "Independent" politician was mentioned.

Thus Conservative politicians were mentioned four times more than Labour politicians. This may simply mirror the newspapers' obsession with the ruling party at the time, rather than the Tory politicians' obsession with lone-parents.

Who Were the Actors Quoted in 1993?

When studying actors quoted, the picture changes. The most frequent voices quoted were those of politicians. Seventyfour percent of the 63 people quoted in articles were politicians; again most were Tories (51%) as compared to 23 percent Labour.

Table 4. *Actors Quoted (1993)*

Actors Quoted	Frequency	Percent
Tory politicians	33	51
Labour politicians	15	23
Lib/Dem	0	0
Social agencies	5	8
Lone-parents	3	4
Fathers	3	4
Women activists/ feminists	2	3
Clergy	2	3
Children	2	3
Total	65	99

It is very interesting to note that lone-parents themselves almost disappeared here. Only four percent had the opportunity to voice their opinions.

Eight percent of the quotes came from social agencies along with four percent from fathers (no married mothers) and three percent were quotes from women activists and clergy respectively.

It thus appears that the newspapers chose to quote elite persons when discussing lone-parents. Of course this is the most frequent construction of news in general as has been argued by many: Galtung and Ruge (1973), Seymour-Ure (1991), Schudson (1991), Eldridge (1995) and Franklin (1997). This reinforces the argument of Stuart Hall et al. from 1978 about primary definers, usually official sources of information, where government and political parties play an important role.

Who Were the "Victims" in 1993?

By far the largest group viewed as "victims" were lone-parents themselves.

Table 5. *Reference to Victims (1993)*

Victims	Frequency	Percent
Lone-parents	61	41
Children	41	28
Society	18	12
Women	12	8
Tax Payers	12	8
Fathers	4	3
'Proper Citizens'	1	1
Total	149	101

Forty-one percent of the victims referred to were lone-parents, followed by children (28%). Society, taxpayers and 'proper citizens' were referred to in 25 percent of the cases.

What Were the Salient Issues in 1993

Increase in numbers of single parents was the most dominant issue (19%), followed by 18 percent which dealt with children/problem children. Thus more than one third of the issues dealt with the increase and problems with children.

Table 6. *Salient Issues (1993)*

Salient Issues	Frequency	Percent
Increase of lone-parents	56	19
Children/ problem children	53	18
State cost (taxes) Taxpayers	40	14
Fathers/Mothers	40	14
Pregnancy/ Contraceptives	27	9
Homelessness/ Housing	23	8
Employment/ Unemployment	20	7
'Back to Basics'	20	7
Promiscuity/Sex	10	3
Religion/Church	7	2
Total	296	101

Fathers and mothers, pregnancy/contraceptives and promiscuity/sex were categorised in 24 percent of the cases. While state and taxpayers, homelessness and housing, 'Back to Basics' and religion /church were mentioned in 31 percent of the cases.

The issues dealt with were thus predominantly those of the private sphere rather than the public sphere.

Coverage in 1997

The second content analysis was carried out during a two month period (April, May) in 1997. We were interested in this time period, because the Labour Party was now in office. We analysed the same four newspapers: *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Sun* and *The Mirror* (formerly, the Daily Mirror).

Table 7. Number of articles reporting on lone-parents (1997)

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
The Guardian	20	39
The Times	6	12
The Sun	10	20
Daily Mirror	15	29
Total	51	100

The quality newspapers were much less interested in writing about lone-parents in 1997 than they had been in 1993. There was a slight decrease for *The Guardian* (from 42% to 39%), but *The Times* went from 48 percent to 12 percent. However, both *The Sun* (7% to 20%) and *The Mirror* (3% to 29%) increased their interest in lone-parent families. Thus it appears that *The Guardian* on the whole published most about lone-parents and that the tabloids increased their interest in this issue, while *The Times* lost interest.

No article reached the front-page in 1997 as compared with six percent in 1993.

Who Were the Actors Portrayed in 1997?

There were fewer stories in 1997 and therefore fewer main actors. In 1993 lone-parents dominated as actors portrayed. 31 percent were mentioned as main actors in the articles and 29 percent were politicians. In 1997 lone-parents dominated even more (43%) and politicians were still the next group (33%) being portrayed.

All other actors were given less mention than in 1993.

Table 8. Actors portrayed (1997)

Actors portrayed	Frequency	Percent
Lone-parents	69	43
Politicians	53	33
Children	18	11
Fathers	4	3
Clergy	0	0
Social Agencies	13	8
Women Activists/ Feminists	0	0
Law and Order	1	0.5
Married mothers	1	0.5
Journalists	1	0.5
Total	160	99.5

Who Are the Actors Quoted in 1997?

In 1997 the politicians quoted were still the largest number (43 percent and only two percent were Tories). Thus a similar, but much more extreme trend to that in 1993 when 51 percent of those quoted were Tory MPs as compared with 23 percent Labour MPs). This is another example of the significance of the ruling party and elite voices for the newspapers. That the Tory politicians virtually disappears is of course related to the Labour Party's huge electoral victory.

Table 9. Actors Quoted (1997)

Actors quoted	Frequency	Percent
Tory politicians	1	2
Labour politicians	21	41
Lib/Dem	0	0
Social Agencies	9	17
Lone-parents	19	37
Fathers	1	2
Women activists/ feminists	0	0
Clergy	0	0
Children	1	2
Total	52	101

However, the number of lone-parents quoted in 1997 was much higher: 37 percent as compared with only four percent in 1993. If we consider that this current content analysis showed fewer articles

focussing on lone-parents, this is a considerable increase. The only other notable number was social agencies who were quoted in seventeen percent as compared with eight percent in 1993.

Who Were the “Victims” in 1997?

Again the lone-parents (48%) followed by taxpayers and society (28%) and by children (13%) appear as victims. The children were mentioned less in 1997, but it is quite a similar trend to the profile four years earlier, but the numbers are lower.

Table 10. Reference to Victims (1997)

Victims	Frequency	Percent
Lone-parents	38	48
Children	10	13
Society	10	13
Women	3	4
Tax Payers	12	15
Fathers	1	1
‘Proper Citizens’	5	6
Total	79	100

What Were the Salient Issues in 1997?

Table 11. Salient Issues (1997)

Salient Issues	Frequency	Percent
Increase of lone-parents	5	4
Children/ problem children	7	7
State cost (taxes). Tax payers	36	35
Fathers/Mothers	8	8
Pregnancy/ Contraceptives	0	0
Homelessness/ Housing	0	0
Employment/ Unemployment	42	41
‘Back to Basics’	1	1
Promiscuity/Sex	3	3
Religion/Church	0	0
Total	102	99

The focus shifted from increase of single parents (41%) to employment/unemployment (41%), followed by state cost, taxpayers/the economy (36%). Fathers and mothers were mentioned in eight per-

cent and children/problem children in seven percent. Homelessness/housing completely disappeared from the newspapers’ agenda and there was only one mention about ‘Back to Basics’.

Thus over the four years period the interest in the increase in numbers of lone-parents, concern for children and, to a certain extent, homelessness gave way to employment and the economy. In 1997, three-quarter of the issues were related to the public sphere while in 1993, less than one-third did were.

Of course we can argue that economic factors have been of utmost importance both in the discourse of increasing numbers of lone-parents as well as in the employment/unemployment and state costs’ discourse. We would also argue that when the newspapers to such a high degree chose to give voice to the ruling party of the day, the agenda seems to be much more firmly controlled by the ruling party rather than by media professionals.

Characteristics of Moral Panics and Lone-Parents

To return to the characteristics of moral panics as outlined by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), we have found considerable difficulty in attempting to apply them to the reportage of lone-parents. What do these content analyses tell us about the coverage of lone-parents in the press? The quality press (The Guardian and The Times) were concerned with lone-parents over a period of eight months; The Guardian more so than The Times. Both newspapers reported on lone-parents most frequently in July 1993 when some politicians started to single out lone-parent families as scroungers on society. Further the quality papers took up the case of lone-parents more than the two tabloids studied during July 1993. Again in 1997 the issue of lone-parents was on the newspapers’ agenda, but not as frequently as during 1993. Thus it appears as the concept *concern* is highly applicable in reporting on lone-parents.

The concept of *hostility* also appears to be relevant in 1993 as politicians were quoted much more than lone-parents. While single parents were frequently mentioned in the articles, (31%) only four percent were actually quoted. Thus one can interpret that there was a certain hostility or at least lack of interest in listening to lone-parents in 1993. However, this seems less relevant as a characteristic in the 1997 reportage; when 37 percent of those quoted were lone-parents themselves.

In 1997 the politicians were also often portrayed in the press, but now it was Labour MPs. It was also Labour MPs who were quoted most often. (41% as compared to 2% of Conservative politicians). The Tories had almost disappeared.

The concept of *consensus* is not easily applied to the lone-parents. Our data demonstrate that there was a different emphasis on the issues covered by the newspapers during the two content analyses. In 1993 the main concern was with the increase of the number lone-parents and children/ problem children and issues like homelessness/housing and 'Back to Basics'. In 1997 there were no mentions about homelessness/housing and only a few entries on the increase of lone-parents. 'Back to Basics' had also disappeared as an issue. Most of the articles in 1997 concentrated on employment/unemployment and state costs, taxpayers and the economy.

Thus issues and problems change over time, even if there is a basic concern over the costs involved for the society. However, the portrayals of the lone family are more various and complicated and not at all as clear cut as argued in a moral panic view.

The characteristics of *disproportionality* and *volatility* aspect seem less applicable to the issue of lone-parents. From 1993, the subject of lone-parents was on the newspapers' agenda. Although there was less coverage in 1997 by the broadsheets, there was more by the tabloids.

Our data thus illustrate that lone-parents were portrayed by the press relatively consistently over the period studied. Although issues and emphases changed, the basic concern remained.

Theories of Moral Panics

Why are there moral panics? Why is that the public is mobilised against a specific 'folkdevil' at a particular time? Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), see three possible explanations which can be used to address these questions. These are, the grassroots model, the elite-engineered model and the interest-group model. We will try to apply our data to these three models.

The Grassroots Model

This model argues that the panic starts with the general public who become anxious about a specific problem or issue. When this concern is taken up by the media and politicians, they are simply expressing a more widespread concern. This model

opposes the idea that politicians and the media generate the panic, because they could not create a concern where none existed before.

One example of this grassroots concern relates to the increased distribution of heroin and crack cocaine in the USA in the late 1980s. A response to this concern was the passing of anti-drug legislation in 1986 and 1988. Stolz (1990) argues that the policy-making may have been simply a response to concerns of the general public, not just those of interest groups or elites. This theory does not seem to explain our data.

We found that the coverage increased dramatically during the month of July 1993 when the Tory politicians explicitly started to attack lone-parents. However, there had been steady coverage over the periods we studied.

The Elite-Engineered Model

This is the idea that elites deliberately and consciously undertake a campaign to create public fear and panic in order to divert attention away from the real problems in society. The mugging panic of the 1970s can be fitted into this model as Hall et al (1978) argue that the reaction to the crimes, was out of all proportion to any level of actual threat posed by the crimes. Mugging was a perceived or symbolic threat rather than an actual one. Hall et al., as we have seen saw the moral panic as diversionary tactic when capitalism was facing several crises. Although the situation is cited as an example of hegemony at work rather than a conspiracy of the ruling elites to subjugate the masses, it is unclear as to why the issue of mugging rather than any other, should have been taken up in this way. The public had to be convinced that the real enemy was not the crisis of capitalism, but black youth on the streets. So the moral panic over mugging was engineered or orchestrated by the elite, or capitalist class together with the media, the legislature, the police and the courts. (Hall et al, 1978 :138)

The same argument could be used about lone-parents as there were many more articles about them during the months the politicians started to explicitly attack them. We would however argue that the press treatment of lone-parents had little to do with moral panics and more with the politicians' political agendas.

Interest-Group Theory

This approach opposes the elite-engineered approach because it challenges the idea that elites are

involved at all. It argues that the exercise of power in producing the moral panic comes from middle-level groups, such as professional associations, police departments, media professionals, religious and educational groups. So in any moral panic, we would need to ask the question “who benefits?”.

Interest-group activists may sincerely believe that their efforts will advance a noble cause -one in which they sincerely believe. Advancing a moral and ideological cause almost inevitably entails advancing the status and often the material interests of the group who believes in it, and advancing the status and material interests of a group may simultaneously advance its morality and ideology (Goode and Ben Yehuda, 1994 :139).

However, when studying lone-parents this approach is not helpful because our data demonstrate that it was the politicians of one faith or the other who were most often quoted. Not only were lone-parents in 1993 allowed very little possibility to voice their concern, but both in 1993 and 1997, there were surprisingly few other “experts” quoted or portrayed.

Conclusion

The treatment of lone-parents in the press during the years of the John Major government and the first years of Tony Blair have often loosely been referred to as moral panic. We wanted to examine this idea through systematically studying the various components in a moral panic and applying these to the empirical studies we have carried out.

One of the criteria used to define moral panics by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) was *concern* and this concept is highly applicable to the reporting on lone-parents in our content analysis. *Hostility* is another criteria used by the authors and in the content analyses from 1993 one can argue that this was the case because mostly politicians were quoted in the newspapers while only four percent of other quotes were from lone-parents. However in 1997 this has changed and lone-parents accounted for 37 percent of the quotes, but politicians’ voices were still dominant. *Consensus* was a third criteria used and

from the content analysis we learned that there were different emphases on the issues covered in the two content analysis. Focus shifted from concern over the increase of single parents to issues about employment/ unemployment. Thus in 1997, three-quarters of the issues were related to the public sphere (employment and the economy) while in 1993 less than one-third did. Thus we can’t claim that there is a consensus about the most important issues. Finally, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) mention *disproportionality* and *volatility* . Again our data does not really reflect this. We can on the contrary demonstrate that the subject of lone-parents was on the newspapers’ agenda from 1993. through to 1997.

Again Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) identify three possible models to answer why moral panics occur. *The grassroots model*, which argues that the panic starts with the general public who become anxious about a problem or issue. Little in our content analysis support this model. The newspapers’ construction of this specific issue was dominated by politicians of one faith or the other and the coverage increased dramatically in July 1993 when the Tory politicians started being extremely nasty describing lone-parents and their alleged motives.

The elite-engineered model is of more interest here, because the politicians were the primary definers. However, we would put a question mark about if this really reflects a moral panic rather argue that it has more to do with the political agenda. Finally Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) discuss *the interest group model*, which opposes the elite-engineered model. Again our data can not support this model either, because the politicians were the dominant definers in both 1993 and 1997 and added to this there were surprisingly few other ‘experts’ quoted or portrayed.

While we are in no position to argue that moral panics do not exist at all, we would argue that it is not a concept which can adequately explain the portrayal of lone-parents in the newspapers studied. The findings point to coverage being constructed and driven by events, political agendas, news values, and media practices rather than of moral panics.

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