

moral panics and disproportionality: the case of LSD use in the sixties

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Critics of the moral panic dismiss this extremely useful, often-cited, and durable concept on the basis of inapplicable criteria. Drawing on the example of LSD use in the sixties, these critics mistakenly assume that the disaster analogy is apt, insisting that the threat to society, and society's responses, be very much like victims trapped in a burning building. In addition to the fact that the introduction of a new and potentially harmful drug into a society does not entail an on-the-spot threat or reaction, the natural disaster does not typically involve a folk devil or deviant. But the supposed threat of LSD use *did* entail sensitization, stereotyping, exaggeration, the rush to judgment, sensational anecdotes, and bogus claims. The moral panic notion continues to illuminate social processes and deserves to remain in the sociologist's conceptual tool-box.

The moral panics concept has proven to be one of the more durable, useful, and often-cited ideas in the social science

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literature. The first edition of Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, published a bit more than a third of a century ago, has inspired hundreds of academic articles and a sturdy shelf of books. Chas Critcher brought out a textbook and accompanying anthology (2003, 2006), a rare development for a recent sociological concept. Most scholarly books do not get cited at all in the academic literature, and for those that do, citations precipitously drop off after a year or two. In contrast, there are hundreds of references listed in the Social Science Citation Index both to the moral panics concept and to Stanley Cohen's book, and 2005 and 2006 were the top two years listed for the concept's appearance in the social science literature, a fairly certain indicator that it is not going to disappear any time soon. In 2002, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* was published in a third edition, once again, an unusual event for a scholarly book as well as an indication of the concept's longevity. Moreover, the moral panic is one of the very few concepts developed by sociologists that has been swept into the popular vocabulary. Google lists a third of a million websites under the entry "moral panic" (enclosed in quotation marks) plus half that number under the title "moral panics." Clearly, the moral panic is a popular and heavily cited phenomenon.

AN INTELLECTUAL PUZZLE

All intellectual inquiry begins with a puzzle, a question the investigator seeks to answer. The popularity of the moral panics concept leads us into a seeming contradiction and hence, to me, a puzzle: Why, after such endorsement by the field, the media, and the general public do some critics argue that the *very existence* of the phenomenon is chimerical, a phantom without substance, based on illusory criteria? (Waddington 1986; Cornwell and Linders 2002). How is it possible that some critics believe that a concept that is growing in popularity is without utility and is in fact disappearing from the social sciences? I am not sure I can answer these questions but I can address another: Are sociologists who study the moral panic such Don Quixotes that they do not recognize the will-o'-the-wisp quality of the concept on which they base their research? My answer is no; the concept has substance and can be measured.

My reading of the concept's critics indicates that the most objectionable criterion of the moral panic is disproportionality—the gap or disjunction between the threat or harm of a given behavior and the fervor or concern that that behavior generates in the public, the media, and among legislators and social movement activists and members of interest groups. Disproportion, these critics say, *cannot* be determined or measured and hence, they reason, the moral panic does not exist as an identifiable sociological phenomenon. Here, I would like to address the issue of disproportionality and whether and to what extent this criterion can be identified.

More specifically I would like to use the matter of LSD use in the 1960s as a test case of a moral panic. I would like to argue not only that the concern it generated can be measured against its objective threat but also that applying this calibration produces a disproportion that makes this case an instance of a moral panic.

LSD AS A TEST CASE OF THE MORAL PANIC

Waddington (1986) and more recently Cornwell and Linders (2002) offer a critique that places them firmly among the chorus of nay-sayers who contend that they have the argumentative wherewithal to delete the concept of the moral panic from the sociological conceptual and theoretical lexicon. The moral panics concept, say Cornwell and Linders, “serves as an analytic distraction . . . rather than a useful conceptual tool,” and its foundation-stone, disproportionality, is “so laden with ontological and methodological difficulties as to render it virtually useless as an analytic guiding light” (Cornwell and Linders 2002:314). And second, they say, social reactions to the use of LSD in the sixties were proportional to the threat the drug posed to the society. Here, I argue that these critics make certain assumptions that render their argument questionable. More specifically, I would like to argue that the nay-sayers’ critiques typically offer a logical contradiction in that they say disproportion is impossible to measure because concern and responses to that concern are incommensurable; they are like apples and oranges. But these critics also say that concern and fear to most conditions that generate panics are rational responses to a very

real and present danger, as with LSD in the sixties. Logically, you cannot have it both ways; either the threat is incommensurable with concern, or the concern is a rational, measured response to the threat.

As Cohen explained, once a moral panic is launched, the media and the public are *sensitized* to certain themes and images of deviants as both harmful and newsworthy, and find interesting stories that conform to and confirm this bias. With respect to media representations and claims the public found credible, in the case of LSD in the sixties, the classic clues to the moral panic were present: *stereotyping, exaggeration, distortion, and sensitization* (Cohen 1972:59–65; Critcher 2003:56). Many of these media claims turned out to be factually false, but the sensitization process influenced their credibility: *These are the sorts of things that LSD-crazed people do*. In fact, when it comes to stories in the heat of the moment, members of the public often find false and stereotypical stories scarier, more interesting, and *truer* than empirically true ones.

Many thousands of such instances can be cited, but I will stick to a few factually false stories about drug use (or supposed drug use) that were fascinating and credible to the public in part *because* they were false. The media claimed that: Chinese opium addicts were sexually seducing middle-class white women in substantial numbers (from the late 1800s); cocaine caused African Americans to become violent, to seek out white targets for their violence, and to become superhumanly strong, practically invulnerable to bullets (from the late 1800s to early 1900s); marijuana caused users to go crazy and become violent (from the 1930s); LSD use caused chromosome damage (the 1960s); LSD caused six young men to stare at the sun for hours and go blind (the 1960s); PCP not only caused users to go crazy and become violent, but, somehow, become superhumanly strong, again, practically invulnerable to police bullets (the Frankenstein monster theme, but without a racial angle, from the early 1970s), as Philip Jenkins says (1999), commonly cited in the media for synthetic drugs; PCP caused a youth to gouge out his own eyes (a repeat of the blindness theme, from the early 1970s); not only did an eight year old become a heroin addict, but that this was common in the inner city (from the early 1980s); crack consumed by

expectant mothers was uniquely capable of causing permanent damage to fetuses and newborns (the late 1980s); crack produced "instant addiction," was "sweeping the country," "invading every community," the white upper-middle-class suburbs included (also from the late 1980s); innocent bystander killings by drug gangs was common (the late 1980s); methamphetamine use produced (practically a word-for-word repeat of the crack story) "instant addiction," the abuse of this drug was "sweeping the country like wildfire," "invading the suburbs" (the early 1990s).

The media reported these stories—irresponsibly, we now know, and probably should have known then—because they knew that these stories were newsworthy, both from their professional judgment and from what they surmised the public's reaction would be, and not because they were trying to force them on the public's attention. They were news because they corresponded to the media representatives' definition of what's news (tell a good story, introduce the human interest angle, tell a story with a specific audience in mind) and because publishers, editors, and journalists realized that the public would find these stories interesting. They did not check their sources; they assumed these claims to be true because of the prevailing sentiment of the times. Both media representatives and the public should have been able to look around them and been able to see that these claims were bogus. These stories were appealing and credible because they corresponded to incipient notions of what these new, and newly deviant, drugs were supposed to do. And, unlike stories about mad cow disease, botulism, salmonella poisoning, and the spread of the bird flu virus, these now-classic drug-related stories took on energy not merely from their putative material threat but also from the fact that they introduced a *moral* dimension to their subjects and topics.

With respect to LSD, as with the other drug-related moral panics, sellers or dealers are always folk devils; Timothy Leary, the pied piper of LSD, was a folk devil, as was anyone attempting to seduce young people into the psychedelic, turn-on, tune-in, drop-out ideology; spaced-out hippies, as Michael Brown (1969) showed us, even before the invention of the term, "moral panic," were folk devils. The public did not find these stories believable *exclusively* because the

agents supposedly responsible for the threat could materially harm the society but also because actors designated as deviant were involved.

Just as alcohol and cigarettes are potentially harmful, so are the subjects of these news stories—opium, cocaine, marijuana, LSD, PCP, heroin, and methamphetamine. However, as Cohen asks in his introduction to the third edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002:xxi), why are statements of the harm caused by condition A ignored, dismissed, or of concern only to a small minority, while whereas the harm caused by condition B quickly becomes the topic of widespread public concern, hostility, outrage, denunciations, investigations, legislation, campaigns, a flood of media attention, social movement activity, and so on?

Why is the sale and use of a substance consumed by expectant mothers that causes irreparable and irrefutable harm to fetuses (I refer to the substance, alcohol, and the harm, fetal alcohol syndrome) “not even made a candidate for moral signification” (2002:xxi), whereas the crack babies syndrome (false, as it turns out) generated an avalanche of media attention and public concern? Or selling or consuming alcohol, which causes hallucinations, delusions, the tendency to imagine that one is powerful, invincible, invulnerable, capable of flying or jumping off buildings or into the path of speeding cars or stopping a bullet, likewise, does not generate widespread public outrage on the order of LSD in the sixties? At some point, we have to raise the issue of disproportionality. This disproportion does not mean that the activity in question is harmless but that it generates or generated media attention, fear, hostility, concern, and social control out of proportion to those activities that are as or more harmful. There must be a reason for this disproportion and it is the sociologist’s job to explain this discrepancy. (Yes, during the past couple of decades, the society has begun to address alcoholism, drunk driving, and the consumption of alcohol by minors, but this was not true in the sixties, and those concerns assume we can isolate appropriate from inappropriate alcohol consumption, which was *irrelevant* in the sixties with the use of LSD, because *any* use of this drug was considered *by its very nature* inappropriate.) Sociologists are supposed to look for perturbations or disproportions along these lines.

In 1966, the chair of the New Jersey Narcotic Drug Study Commission called LSD “the greatest threat facing the country today . . . more dangerous than the Vietnam war” (in Brecher et al., 1972:369). That’s not a reckless statement by a random, irresponsible person, it’s a claim the credibility of which is conveyed not only by the supposed responsibility of the official who made it but also by the hysteria of the era.

Why did editors, reporters, or readers ask, *how many* LSD users and *in what proportion* “went crazy,” jumped off buildings thinking they could fly, or tried to stop cars, imagining that they would not be harmed? As with the Janet Cooke story of a fabricated 8-year-old heroin addict (Reinerman and Duskin 1999), the LSD panic reveals the *gullibility* of the media and the public in believing patently outlandish, false, or exaggerated claims. Why did *Science* rush into print the shoddy research report (Cohen, Marinello, and Back 1967) that supposedly demonstrated that LSD damages chromosomes, when any responsible reporter could have picked up the phone and asked an expert about the validity of the methodology of this study? Why did news of the results of this research seize the public’s imagination and sweep the country? Why in this case was the most time-honored norm of the journalism subculture (that is, verify a story with two or more sources) so badly violated? Why wasn’t the careful, detailed factual refutation (Dishotsky et al. 1971) of the LSD chromosome study greeted with the same media attention that the original study received? Clearly, at the time, LSD pathology was news; non-pathology was not.

LSD use in the 1960s was a moral panic precisely because the heated concern it stirred up was disproportional to its physical threat. I submit that its threat was more panic-driven than materially real; what with the supposed threat of cosmic revelations and an alternate world-view—which never panned out to begin with—the use of LSD seemed to possess a *distinctly deviant potential*.

Clearly the use of LSD seemed a threat to American society—but what *kind* of threat? As I said, most commentators at the time argued that the use of LSD posed a threat to the hegemony of the middle class work ethic, morality, and world view. The very notion of otherworldliness that psychedelic propagandists were peddling, which very few users subscribed to, was what seemed so fearful. It was one heck

of a good media story and it made great copy. The fact that the fantasy that LSD would turn young people into hippies and psychedelic zombies (again, Jenkins tells us that the zombie angle is common in synthetic drug panics), not to mention instant mental patients with ravaged chromosomes, was *credible* to the media, the public, and lawmakers, seems to argue that we were in the midst of a moral panic.

Moral panics represent struggles over symbolic representations; there are other such struggles (moral crusades, for example), but we are now focused on one of the more interesting of such struggles, one that perhaps most revealingly exposes social processes and structures. Sectors of the society, or a major swath of the society, become aware of a threat; feel concern and hostility toward supposed perpetrators; name and denounce suitable targets; activate or voice available avenues of denunciation and control, including public opinion, the media, the legislature, and social movement activists and interest groups; and before very long, drop the matter and turn their concern to other issues.

IS THE DISASTER A MEANINGFUL ANALOGY?

Cohen's original formulation (1972:11–13) drew a loose analogy between disasters and moral panics. Critcher (2003:11) sees even the loose analogy as "forced." In fact, Cohen himself (1972:12) said that the differences between the two were "too obvious to have to spell out." The supposed threat of the mods and the rockers in 1964 "clearly were not disasters in the same category of events as earthquakes and floods." Still, he argued, disasters "could almost fit" with moral panics (12).

Cornwell and Linders apply a literal reading to Cohen's loose, "could almost fit" analogy. People do not behave in a moral panic the way they act in a disaster, these critics argue and hence, the analogy is not apt. (Indeed, as Cornwell and Linders themselves say, during a disaster, people typically do not even behave in a panicky fashion, so the analogy is even less apt.) The Beverly Hills Supper Club fire of 1977, cited several times by Cornwell and Linders, is a prime example of a disaster whose threat is palpably immediate, where the actions of the persons in the situation made a difference between life and death. At one point, Cornwell

and Linders (2002:321) apply the disaster analogy so literally that they insist that the threat of LSD be viewed much like being trapped in a flaming building. In contrast, the use of the drug, they say, “was not a spur-of-the-moment, immediate, and desperate response to a glaringly visible threat (like a raging fire).” Of course it was not; no one except Cornwell and Linders have insisted that it is, nor that, in order to represent a threat, it has to be. The putative threat of LSD use was not immediate, and reactions were not on-the-spot; hence, moral panics are not even remotely like disasters, and most particularly they are not at all like being trapped in a “raging fire.” The very example Cornwell and Linders use to emphasize their point betrays their argument’s weakness. To demand that the same sort of panic that applies to (but does not occur with) behavior in a burning building literally apply to the supposed harm associated with the use of a drug recently introduced in a society is to be guilty of the fallacy of reification. Such a literal application of the analogy was never intended, and critiquing the validity of a concept on the basis of a forced analogy is fallacious.

Moreover, what Cornwell and Linders leave out of the picture, and what Cohen failed to mention—and what makes even Cohen’s loose analogy not only weak but irretrievably fatally flawed—is the fact that in the *typical* natural disaster, there is no folk devil. Occasionally, one turns up: representatives who fail to notify the community in a timely fashion, relief workers who exploit the disaster for their own purposes, outsiders who converge on the disaster area and commit crimes against victims. But, completely unlike the moral panic, these wrongdoers did not cause the disaster, and they are never the entire focus of public concern. It is difficult to imagine a moral panic in the absence of the folk devil. Disasters are not *defined by* deviants, folk devils, or bad guys. The particularity of Cohen’s case may lull us into imagining that the same parallelism exists for disasters as a whole and that the disaster analogy with moral panics is apt. They do not exist, and the disaster analogy is not even loosely apt.

CLUES TO DISPROPORTION

Here’s one clue to disproportion: When bad things are said to happen when they do not, that is, when the press or the

rumor mill generates and passes on atrocity stories that do not factually turn out to be true, it's possible we have a moral panic on our hands. Here's another: When the *rhetorical heat* about a given putative threat is raised to the boiling point, we probably have a moral panic on our hands. When the unusual bad outcomes of supposedly threatening behavior is cited as typical or paradigmatic, it's likely that a moral panic is bubbling. When reporters and ordinary citizens and legislators do not bother to look around for indicators that terrible things are happening to good people, again, it could be that a moral panic is in the works. When a lot of people use hyperbolic words and phrases to describe what's going on—Words such as “epidemic,” “plague,” “holocaust,” “invaded,” “contagious,” “pervasive,” “terrifying,” “unprecedented,” “scourge,” “wildfire,” “downfall,” “seductive,” and “ravage”—we are tipped off to the possibility that fear and concern are out of proportion to objective threat and harm (Reinarman and Levine 1997:18–51). As Jenkins says, even though new drugs come along, the rhetoric used in moral panics “is timeless” (1999:4). When politicians propose legislation that suspends routine constitutional guarantees to control the threat in question, we are alerted to the possibility that a moral panic is brewing. When a *lot* of social movement activists figure out an angle to work their particular cause into the equation, jumping on the bandwagon to control the supposedly threatening behavior in question, it is entirely possible that a moral panic is looming in the horizon.

In short, when the heat and passion and outrage of public concern are sufficiently great as to make a collectivity, and the vehicles conveying that collectivity's members' emotions, sufficiently biased as to render askew judgments of scale and proportion; and second, someone or something is regarded as responsible for a disruption in a collectivity's notion of the proper moral order—somebody's doing something that's not right that needs to be corrected. Some such episodes manifest all the defining features of the moral panic; others, only a portion of them. But they are sufficiently different from the more tightly governed routines of everyday life as to induce sociologists to give them a name: moral panics. They have near-timeless and nearly universal applicability, and they deserve to remain in the sociologist's conceptual tool-box.

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