

**EASA Media Anthropology Network
e-Seminar Series**

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

**E-Seminar on Matthew Durlington's working paper
"Moral Panics in Suburban Texas"**

(27 February – 6 March 2007)

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)

jpostill@usa.net

Message subject: *Durington's moral panics e-seminar opens now*

Dear All

Welcome to the 16th EASA media anthropology network e-seminar! The seminar will run on this mailing list for a week from now until Tuesday 6 March. The working paper, by Matthew Durington (Towson University), is entitled “Moral panics in suburban Texas” and you still have time to read the PDF version available at <http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

Matthew Durington completed an M.A. and Ph.D. in Anthropology from Temple University (Philadelphia, PA, USA) in 2003 specialising in urban and visual anthropology. He has recently completed a postdoctorate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa exploring suburban development and racial identity in the post-Apartheid era. He also spent parts of the summers of 2003 and 2004 conducting participatory video work with the !Xo of Ngwatle in Botswana exploring land and water rights issues.

The discussant will be Chas Critcher who recently retired as Professor of Communications at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. Chas has published on moral panics a single authored book, *Moral Panics and the Media* (Open University Press 2003) and an edited collection titled *Critical Readings on Moral Panics and the Media* (Open University Press 2006).

Later today, Chas will be posting his comments directly to this list, after which Matthew will have a chance to respond. The discussion will then be open to all. As always, please note that these sessions can only really work if we have wide and sustained participation, so all contributions, long and short, are very welcome. To post, please write directly to medianthro at esaonline.org, i.e. not to me.

Thanking our presenter and discussant for their time and effort, it's over to Chas now!

John

Chas Critcher (Sheffield Hallam University)

Charles@critcher.f9.co.uk

Message subject: *moral panics paper*

Response to Matthew Durington's “Moral Panics in Suburban Texas”

**for the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
Media Anthropology Network e-seminar 27 February – 6 March 2007**

By Chas Critcher (Sheffield Hallam University)

Dear all,

There follows a commentary on Matthew Durlington's paper 'Moral panics in suburban Texas'. Matthew is due to respond in due course when the debate can begin in earnest.

Chas Critcher

Professor of Communications (retired)

Sheffield Hallam University UK.

1. This working paper is excerpted from a full-length monograph. It is obvious that there is much more evidence available than could be presented here. I am therefore conscious that the author could say 'I have covered that in more detail in the relevant chapter'. Sometimes it may be harder to abbreviate a longer work than to expand a shorter one.

2. The overall thesis that this constituted a moral panic seems well justified. The key processes, stages and outcomes are present. Much is gained from the range of literature reviewed especially that on the nature of American suburbia. I thought I knew the moral panic literature but there are several references here new to me which I intend to follow up.

3. As originally exemplified by Goode and Ben Yehuda (1994) and subsequently advocated by others, moral panic analysis can only be improved by carefully documented case studies which provide the richness of detail required to apply moral panic concepts properly. This paper seems to me to fall in this category. It helps us avoid the often generalized and irresolvable debate about whether this or that issue was or was not a moral panic by supplying an account in which we can see for ourselves the unfolding of the narrative and of the key actors and scenes within it.

4. As I amongst others have suggested, moral panic analysis is not an end in itself but is most usefully conceptualized as an heuristic device. What are identified as crucial presences or absences often lead us into areas which are beyond the scope of moral panic analysis. That is the case here since – to simplify somewhat – the panic turns out to be a defence of the symbolic white space of suburban America and thus not about 'the heroin problem' at all.

5. There would be some room, and this may be the result of excerpting from a longer monograph, for more detail on the construction of the panic. Goode and Ben Yehuda have drawn our attention to the role of claims makers, individual or organized groups who claim jurisdiction over an issue, defining its nature, causes and thus remedies. These can in principle be longstanding pressure groups or temporary coalitions of local interest groups. At one point p.6 Durlington's paper does refer to such groupings as 'the control culture'. It would be useful to know more about who these people were, their motivations and interests.

6. A related area is that of the rhetoric or discourse used to explain these deaths. Presumably the victims were portrayed as passive dupes of evil drug dealing outsiders. Innocent, once hooked, there was no way back. This must have involved suppressing a range of other accounts such as drug use being the result of family tensions, psychological inadequacies, peer group subcultures and the rest. Since the 'success'

of a moral panic depends upon establishing discursive hegemony it would be interesting to know how this was achieved. The media might perhaps be expected to show greater tendency to explore a range of such explanations outside the narrower self-serving rhetoric of local people. Here too one might look for the 'experts': who is or is not accredited by the media. Often law enforcement agencies and local politicians are given greater credence than professional experts on drug taking from, say, specialist treatment centres or from psychiatry in general. The current paper does not suggest any great debate in or around the media about why deaths from heroin addiction happened. It may well be that this was indeed so. If it was, it might be worth exploring the strategies employed to suppress alternative and for local people more troubling explanations.

7. In terms of pointing to salient literature I guess there is a problem here with that on the construction of drugs as a social problem. It is so vast as to be daunting. Is that why, I wonder, that the drug problem is not one of the sets of literature listed on page 1 as those to be synthesised? To narrow it down, one might look for studies of social reaction to white middle class youth taking hard drugs, especially with fatal results. If that's too narrow perhaps settle for respectable youth taking any kind of drug. Goode and Ben Yehuda's book has an interesting case study on such a drug panic in Israel in 1982. There is also Erich Goode's original (1990) article on the 1980s US drug panic. I guess I am suggesting that what Goode and Ben Yehuda would call the 'content' of this panic might need a little more elaboration.

8. Another angle would be to compare this example with others where middle class youth go off the rails, so that their deviance has to be explained (away). Would the Columbine or other school shootings be of this type? If the 'disturbed youth' paradigm was used there why not in Plano? A rather obscure discussion of another such incident is in Cromer (2004), when some respectable Jewish boys wantonly murdered a Palestinian taxi driver in Israel.

9. I really don't want to stir up a hornet's nest but the paper refers many times to media ethnography and explains the duration of the fieldwork and the range of data collected. Methodological discussions too frequently become epistemological positions from which there is no escape. I would simply say that for a claim to have conducted a media ethnography to be sustained, there would need to be some clear thinking about the definitions and practices involved. This is so precisely because there have been so few of these for moral panics that the value added needs to be specified. I wonder if in retrospect we would call Cohen's original project ethnography?

10. Overall I enjoyed this paper a lot. It made me think about how case studies help to test and improve concepts or models like that of moral panic. Often this involved moving beyond them to make new kinds of connections, here with what is apparently another suburban version of the American dream. But it's not for a Brit to comment any more on that.

References

Cromer G (2004) "'Children from good homes': moral panics about middle class delinquency', *British Journal of Criminology*, 44:391-400.

Goode E (1990) 'The American drug panic of the 1980s: social construction or objective threat?', *The International Journal of the Addictions*, 25 (9):1083-98.
Goode E and Ben-Yehuda N (1994) *Moral Panics*, Blackwell.

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)

jpostill@usa.net

Message subject: *Over to Matthew now*

Many thanks for those opening comments, Chas! It's over to Matthew now, after which the rest of us can join in.

John

Matthew Durlington (Towson University)

mdurlington@towson.edu

Message subject: *Re: Over to Matthew now*

Howdy folks and thanks for your interest. I look forward to your collective comments. At this point I would also like to acknowledge John Postill for securing such a respected discussant for my paper. I have known Chas Critcher's work from the landmark study "Policing the Crisis" and my students who have enrolled in my course on moral panics have benefited greatly from his book "Moral Panics and the Media". It is an honor to have him as the discussant for this seminar.

Since Chas organized his comments in the manner below, I will address each one of them specifically after each individually numbered entry.

1. This working paper is excerpted from a full-length monograph. It is obvious that there is much more evidence available than could be presented here. I am therefore conscious that the author could say 'I have covered that in more detail in the relevant chapter'. Sometimes it may be harder to abbreviate a longer work than to expand a shorter one.

1. (Response) True. There are extensive examples of evidence offered by a wide set of media examples and ethnographic engagements detailed in the larger study as well as an extended conceptual and theoretical framework. This is not an excuse but rather the reality of a working paper.

2. The overall thesis that this constituted a moral panic seems well justified. The key processes, stages and outcomes are present. Much is gained from the range of literature reviewed especially that on the nature of American suburbia. I thought I knew the moral

panic literature but there are several references here new to me which I intend to follow up.

2. (Response) Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks to do in writing about suburban development, moral panics and media is tackling and contextualizing the wide array of studies and treatments of these subjects. No matter what, any study will not contain any and all treatments of these overall subjects. In particular, for the term ‘moral panic’ there are plethora of examples where the term is used, but not really applied in the sense that the originators of the term intended or those who have worked with the concept in various studies. I believe the advertisement for the talk by Stanley Cohen, Stuart Hall and David Garland at the British Academy this week states that there are 267,000 hits for the term on Google alone.

3. As originally exemplified by Goode and Ben Yehuda (1994) and subsequently advocated by others, moral panic analysis can only be improved by carefully documented case studies which provide the richness of detail required to apply moral panic concepts properly. This paper seems to me to fall in this category. It helps us avoid the often generalized and irresolvable debate about whether this or that issue was or was not a moral panic by supplying an account in which we can see for ourselves the unfolding of the narrative and of the key actors and scenes within it.

3. (Response) If anything, I feel as though this is perhaps the largest methodological contribution that anthropology can lend to moral panic analysis or media studies. It is something I am still working on for sure. The ethnographic method dictates long-term participant observation. When concerned with the relationship of media and culture specifically, this extended fieldwork provides the space for a researcher to not solely determine whether a media driven event is a moral panic or not, but ground this question in fieldwork amongst various cultural producers who create the media studied in addition to gauging its reception among different groups situated in larger processes (local, regional, national, etc.) This is a bit of a simplistic explanation of the fieldwork process but the foundation of any media study coming from an anthropological vantage.

4. As I amongst others have suggested, moral panic analysis is not an end in itself but is most usefully conceptualized as an heuristic device. What are identified as crucial presences or absences often lead us into areas which are beyond the scope of moral panic analysis. That is the case here since – to simplify somewhat – the panic turns out to be a defence of the symbolic white space of suburban America and thus not about ‘the heroin problem’ at all.

4. (Response) Absolutely. As readers of the working paper can possibly ascertain, I think one can document the occurrence of a moral panic and provide the details of that phenomenon readily. The real analysis comes through the identification of what the moral panic is really about. What are the larger contextual issues and cultural conditions that the panic is situated in? While in the working paper I make links to racial identity formation in one contemporary North American suburban environment, there are consistently more issues at stake in these events.

5. There would be some room, and this may be the result of excerpting from a longer monograph, for more detail on the construction of the panic. Goode and Ben Yehuda have drawn our attention to the role of claims makers, individual or organized groups who claim jurisdiction over an issue, defining its nature, causes and thus remedies. These can in principle be longstanding pressure groups or temporary coalitions of local interest groups. At one point p.6 Durlington's paper does refer to such groupings as 'the control culture'. It would be useful to know more about who these people were, their motivations and interests.

5. (Response). I do not want to consistently rely on the excuse that there is a larger explanatory context in the larger study, but Chas has graciously given me that out so I will take it on this note in particular. The construction of the moral panic in Plano also involved a number of community meetings and other events that may seem boring on the surface, but for the ethnographic research become revelatory of the multiple perspectives/concerns that surrounded this situation. I document these as institutional concerns and locate individuals who represent these different institutions who had a stake in what was going on and how it would be supposedly remedied. A number of individuals did form several temporary coalitions and some of the most interesting moments of fieldwork and analysis have come from following individuals as they traversed different groups, i.e. the parent who goes to a PTA meeting, sits on a police community relations board and the local chamber of commerce. Sometimes conflicts were not generated among individuals, but within the psyche of individuals themselves.

6. A related area is that of the rhetoric or discourse used to explain these deaths. Presumably the victims were portrayed as passive dupes of evil drug dealing outsiders. Innocent, once hooked, there was no way back. This must have involved suppressing a range of other accounts such as drug use being the result of family tensions, psychological inadequacies, peer group subcultures and the rest. Since the 'success' of a moral panic depends upon establishing discursive hegemony it would be interesting to know how this was achieved. The media might perhaps be expected to show greater tendency to explore a range of such explanations outside the narrower self-serving rhetoric of local people. Here too one might look for the 'experts': who is or is not accredited by the media. Often law enforcement agencies and local politicians are given greater credence than professional experts on drug taking from, say, specialist treatment centres or from psychiatry in general. The current paper does not suggest any great debate in or around the media about why deaths from heroin addiction happened. It may well be that this was indeed so. If it was, it might be worth exploring the strategies employed to suppress alternative and for local people more troubling explanations.

6. (Response). One of the most interesting aspects of the media study was to note the repeated formula that national broadcasters would use, often involving the same images and talking heads who had appeared on a variety of local news programs and were often then elevated to national talk shows. While a variety of accounts were more than plausible and actually provided more explanatory power for the heroin overdose deaths, a sensationalist narrative that portrayed the teenagers as victims satisfied a variety of concerns: to shelter the family from critique, to assist in the placement of blame away from various institutions such as schools, etc. Also, if those who died are portrayed as victims it assists in the displacement of blame away from the suburb and all of these

entities, which is main premise I am operating from. Parents were given credence over law enforcement officials and politicians consistently in that order. Those licensed chemical dependency counselors or other professionals were often reduced to sound bites, even in public forms where the lengthy explanation was not tolerated, only the quick solution despite its feasibility or not. The fact that those who may have had the capacity to provide a more complex explanation were often pushed aside for the sensationalist figure provide much consternation and this is documented through a number of figures in the study. I should also mention that I did attempt to situate the work in a Critical Medical Anthropology approach as outlined by Singer and others.

7. In terms of pointing to salient literature I guess there is a problem here with that on the construction of drugs as a social problem. It is so vast as to be daunting. Is that why, I wonder, that the drug problem is not one of the sets of literature listed on page 1 as those to be synthesized? To narrow it down, one might look for studies of social reaction to white middle class youth taking hard drugs, especially with fatal results. If that's too narrow perhaps settle for respectable youth taking any kind of drug. Goode and Ben Yehuda's book has an interesting case study on such a drug panic in Israel in 1982. There is also Erich Goode's original (1990) article on the 1980s US drug panic. I guess I am suggesting that what Goode and Ben Yehuda would call the 'content' of this panic might need a little more elaboration.

7. (Response). Indeed, the literature on this subject is daunting and I do not give proper reference to this body of literature and the necessity to synthesize it in the working paper. I am aware of the studies referenced and there are a number of additional studies that are fieldwork-based explorations of drug culture. While there is a dearth of research on what many would claim as the stereotypical subjects depicted in studies treating drug use and culture, there is not a large body of anthropological work specifically focused aspect on white middle class suburban youth. I have looked outside of anthropology for some epidemiological work and would appreciate any references from participants who may be familiar with more of this or any literature treating this subject.

8. Another angle would be to compare this example with others where middle class youth go off the rails, so that their deviance has to be explained (away). Would the Columbine or other school shootings be of this type? If the 'disturbed youth' paradigm was used there why not in Plano? A rather obscure discussion of another such incident is in Cromer (2004), when some respectable Jewish boys wantonly murdered a Palestinian taxi driver in Israel.

8. (Response). This is a great point and one that I have explored, but perhaps not in the detail that Chas is recommending here. While there is some resonance between the events at Columbine with the phenomenon in Plano, I believe a major difference is that the Columbine events found an easy scapegoat. Initially it was in forms of popular culture through the music of Marilyn Manson, video games such as Doom and films like the Basketball Diaries. Eventually it was the two teenagers that committed the heinous acts and eventually, with much time elapsed, did issues such as psychology and other factors come into play in the evaluation of the tragedy. The disturbed youth paradigm was not invoked in Plano. This is due to the fact that there was an honest need expressed to salvage youth who did not die but were identified as addicts through

rehabilitation. Also, my position is that to label those who died as disturbed youth would have contradicted the victimization that facilitated the reactions that occurred. And, not to rely on this excuse again, but the discourse surrounding the one victim who was of Latin descent was incredibly problematic and speaks to the racial overtones of the phenomenon.

9. I really don't want to stir up a hornet's nest but the paper refers many times to media ethnography and explains the duration of the fieldwork and the range of data collected. Methodological discussions too frequently become epistemological positions from which there is no escape. I would simply say that for a claim to have conducted a media ethnography to be sustained, there would need to be some clear thinking about the definitions and practices involved. This is so precisely because there have been so few of these for moral panics that the value added needs to be specified. I wonder if in retrospect we would call Cohen's original project ethnography?

9. (Response) Again, absolutely. Interestingly enough, when I have presented Cohen's book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* to students in a course I teach on moral panics, one of the ultimate evaluations is to question whether or not the research detailed could be specified as ethnographic or not. The question of ethnographicness is one that has plagued the contested nature of the term ethnographic film within visual anthropology for decades for example. The nature, practices engaged and content of ethnographies is also contested terrain how does one account for a field that produces very descriptive work on the one hand, and experiential work on the other, under the blanket heading of ethnography. Post crisis of representation in the field, this has become even more contested, i.e. interesting. Often, this comes down to a question of intent by the researcher to satisfy methodological criteria laid down by anthropology or perhaps through an identification as an anthropologist. I think for the purposes of this listserv and those who make up this very active subdiscipline of media and anthropology, one of the primary concerns has been to single out what is an anthropological approach to media that is differentiated from other perspectives. It is an interesting question and one that is constantly debated and tweaked. What makes this unique? Yes, I am posing a question to skirt around this. But, it is important in any study claiming the title of media ethnography or the other multiple synonyms that exist out there to be beholden to anthropological methods and this should be fully articulated in the research. I am considering whether or not I am trapped epistemologically here or if I find comfort in the methodology.

10. Overall I enjoyed this paper a lot. It made me think about how case studies help to test and improve concepts or models like that of moral panic. Often this involved moving beyond them to make new kinds of connections, here with what is apparently another suburban version of the American dream. But it's not for a Brit to comment any more on that.

10. (Response) I will leave it open as well. Thanks Chas.

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)

jpostill@usa.net

Message subject: *Discussion open to all*

Many thanks to Matthew for such a prompt and comprehensive response! The discussion is now open to all on the list. Very short questions and comments are as welcome as longer ones.

To post please write directly to medianthro@easaonline.org (NB if you don't receive your own message straight away do bear in mind that the listserv can be slow at times and posts can be delayed by 10 min. or even longer).

John

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)

jpostill@usa.net

Message subject: *1. Everyday TV, 2. Social dramas*

A great paper. I have an observation and a question (just thinking aloud)

1. Comment: I was intrigued by the oft-repeated question in Plano "How could this happen here?". This seems to be an everyday narrative device in the UK media, but not necessarily as part of a moral panic. This seems to be the sequence:

- A. Something bad happens somewhere, preferably with a British connection
- B. The reporter goes to the scene and finds a 'community' in shock; 'community members' are interviewed inside or against the backdrop of the local mosque, church, street, pub, etc. How could this happen here?
- C. Politicians, community leaders, experts, and so on, put the whole thing into some sort of context, come up with 'explanations', point fingers..
- D. The story is quietly forgotten as another shocking story takes the headlines

Recent TV examples:

'Muslim community' in Walthamstow mosque (N. London) after news of thwarted attempt at bombing airliners; Ipswich churchgoers after murder of several sex workers; Manchester(?) neighbours of family whose dog killed a little girl; villagers in India after the lynching of a British backpacker in their midst (in this last instance the schema is stretched a bit!) and so on.

2. Question. I was wondering whether in addition to a moral panic, there wasn't also a 'social drama' (Turner 1974, 1996 [1957]) going on at critical stages of this process? A sub- or parallel process perhaps? You will recall that for Turner, a social drama has the following phases:

1. Breach (of normal relations obtaining within a social/political field)
2. Crisis (accusations are rife, action-sets emerge, etc)
3. Redressive action (wrongdoers put things right)
4. Reintegration or schism (among the opposed factions)

Here I have in mind the phases of the panic in which the various local parties involved (parents, police, politicians, etc) were accusing one another of the deaths, and then of how redressive action was taken by the authorities ('brown bodies' were removed from the suburb) so that the crisis was eventually overcome.

Just a few thoughts – John

References

Turner, V.W. (1974) *Dramas, fields and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Ithaca, New York : Cornell University Press.

Turner, V.W. (1996) *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (originally published in 1957). Oxford : Berg.

Sarah Pink (Loughborough University)

S.Pink@lboro.ac.uk

Message subject: *seminar comment*

Many thanks to Matthew for a great paper which I found very interesting from several perspectives. Below are a couple of questions, relating to what first came to mind

1. I was interested in hearing more about the socialities that are involved in (and perhaps constitute) the groups and committees that people work together in to produce these 'campaigns'. The background to this is that in my own work about the Slow City movement and how it is developing in the UK, I have found that in the towns I am doing my fieldwork in usually the people who are involved in the Slow City Committee are likely to also be on the Slow Food Committee and any number of other local committees. Often their partners are on the committees they are not on, so that effectively they have a link to a set of committees and their 'actions' and resources (of persons, knowledge, connections to others etc.). One of the things that has come through strongly in my work is the idea of 'bringing people together' to achieve something (as well as the feel-good factor this creates), especially in towns where those who have been 'brought together' feel that something 'needs to be done'. I was wondering if any similar themes have come through in your work?

2. I know you are also involved in visual anthropology and was wondering if and how you might have used video or photography as part of this project?

Sarah

Dr Sarah Pink
Reader in Social Anthropology
Programme Director, Sociology
Department of Social Sciences
Loughborough University
Loughborough
LE11 3TU
<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/depstaff/staff/pink.htm>

Matthew Durlington (Towson University)

mdurlington@towson.edu

Message subject: *Re: seminar comment*

To address comment #1, My principal informants often lamented that they never were home any weekday night due to their participation on multiple committees, action groups, etc.. So, yes, there was a large amount of cross involvement and the collected group of individuals that were affiliated with multiple groups would actually form a consensus on issues that would be conveyed in different settings.. this was an interesting component of the developing reactions that I witnessed. What I was also able to ascertain was that the alarmed reaction in response to media coverage created a large amount of initial participation/interest at various organized events or meetings. There was a direct correlation between heightened media coverage and heightened attendance at community forums. So much so that last minute changes in venue to accommodate these surges often occurred. Most of the people participating consistently in action groups were individuals directly affected by the events taking place, it was rare that the random suburban community member would participate although it was not unheard of. Group dynamics being what they are, there was always the individual who promised continued involvement and action, but was never seen again after their initial appearance. Those who 'stuck it out' were the ones that are similar to the individuals you describe below. The scenario you describe below also occurred... not always by intent but usually when two meetings were accidentally scheduled on the same night and at the same time and one partner would attend the former, the other the latter. There was often a 'feel good' capacity but often it was more of a coping mechanism that came from shared experience, especially for parents whose teenagers had died or those who had teenagers in recovery. The telling of one's story repeatedly was often described as cathartic.

Comment #2... I'm really glad you asked this question. As a product of Temple University's program in the anthropology of visual communication (a bit of a shameless plug for my old program thank you) my initial methodology was thoroughly grounded in not only using anthropology to study media, but also produce some form of anthropological media as well about what was occurring. A number of things happened that deterred me from following the intended action of creating some form of ethnographic media attached to fieldwork and I am attempting to write about this as a type of 'cautionary tale' for fledgling visual anthropologists. Essentially, some

topics do not necessarily become the fodder for the production of ethnographic media. Needless to say, my institutional review board process was quite extensive due to the nature of the work and the participants. I am sure that one could also understand the delicate nature of attempting to videotape/film the cultural context surrounding heroin usage, dealing, treatment and recovery. Also, participants in law enforcement were not too keen on the possibility of being documented by video. Suffice it to say... there were countless obstacles that often came down to whether or not it was still worth documenting visually or not.

More than anything else though, it was the fact of where I would be aligned when the camera was brought out during the fieldwork process. I found out very quickly that the type of commentary I would receive when informants were talking to me with a camera was different than when I was conducting 'regular' participant observation. Now, do not mistake that as an excuse or a statement that a less sufficient form of information was solicited when visual methods are employed. In fact, I align myself with the interesting position articulated by David MacDougall that perhaps visual anthropology necessitates a 'different way of knowing' all together (bad paraphrase). The dilemma was the actual context of participant observation... the individuals I was working with were also becoming subjects of media speculation and/or were producing media simultaneously. The line of explanation between convincing people that I was producing ethnographic media as opposed to a clip that would appear on the nightly news or a syndicated talk show was futile. Simply put, I was often aligned with the media I was attempting to study causing further separation from the subjects of the research who were being depicted by this media! Now, with that being said this could have made an interesting piece of ethnographic media in and of itself, but this dilemma combined with the previous explanation regarding the nature of the research led me away from creating an ethnographic film/video/photography. (I promise I am more clear about this in longer prose but I am rushing this response).

Great question Sarah.

md

Peter Hervik (Malmö University)

peter.hervik@imer.mah.se

Message subject: *Moral panic analysis*

Dear Matthew and List,

I have been looking forward to read Matthew's moral panic article, and ended up being very happy about it. This is a great, inspiring and helpful article for anyone doing media analysis of events that end up in a vicious spiral leading farther and farther away from the triggering story. I have used the moral panic concepts on several events in studies of the Danish media's coverage of ethnic minority issues and Islam. This leads me to

the first question, which goes to the Matthew as well as the list. Most of the quoted literature is English and most cases are from the U.K. or USA, except Arthur Gould's piece. In addition to this literature, what (quality) studies exist from elsewhere including other (major) languages?

It seems to me that you are missing a crucial dimension in your paper (which may be in the book), namely that a key imperative for both news media journalists (and their institutions) and politicians is indeed to create moral panic. For the journalists this is what the criteria of "relevance", "sensation", and "identification" is all about. We experience these attempts to create moral panic everyday in the news media although most of them of course are not successful. Politicians also have an interest in creating moral panic, since this may enable a transformation of popular opinion so that certain laws (that couldn't otherwise be agreed on), can pass as legislation or administrative decisions. Since evoking moral panic is embedded in news journalism, one would expect to find the same individuals or forces driving the moral panic behind its different phases from evoking it until the final "conclusion" in court or wherever. I would think that locating attempts to create moral panic in the structure of news journalism, would help us to understand better, why few people take up the responsibility or take interest in fighting back the moral panic, through attempts to introduce a more nuanced picture of what goes on in the suburban drug issue. The media does not have much interest in stopping a "successful" moral panic story and in my experience they will often steamroll any serious expert, whose comments threatens to contain the ongoing panic. A Danish moral panic stricken debate in late 2002 and early 2003 on circumcision of Somali teenagers only stopped, when journalists and politicians realized that the alleged number of circumcisions ended up exceeding the number of girls by a two to one ratio. No one was interested in stopping the story by listening to experts. But then again experts often contribute voluntarily to the panic anyway, which of course is included in Cohen's original definition.

To your (English) list of references, I would add Steven Gregory's "Time to Make Doughnuts" (*Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 17(1):41-55, 1994, which can be seen as another outstanding example of how moral panic works. Also Susan Willis (Routledge, 1991) "A Primer for Daily Life" seems relevant for her treatment of how members of the (bubbled up) white middle class respond to people of their own class, who has become drug addicts. The mechanism is to immediately portray them as members of an out-group and not as a part of the safe and innocent suburban enclaves.

Peter Hervik,
Associate Professor
Peace and Conflict Studies and Political Anthropology
Malmö University
20506 Malmö
Sweden

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)

danieltaghioff@yahoo.com

Message subject: *Re: Moral panic analysis*

Hi list

I must admit to not having had time to follow this debate properly, apologies if this comment is off the mark.

What strikes me about moral panics is the issue of what is not worthy of a moral panic. I guess this is a bit of a spinoff from discussions of news values.

In development it is pretty striking that some things get a lot more attention to others: Compare the Asian Tsunami to the Rwandan Massacres.

Now setting aside the obvious differences between those two, is there anything in the studies of Moral panics mentioned that gives clues as to why some issues are not really fuel to a media frenzy, despite being major events on the face of things?

I suppose this also goes back to things like Chomsky's discussion over the silences around East Timor: are there ethnographic insights to be drawn about moral 'don't panics'?

Daniel

Matthew Durlington (Towson University)

mdurlington@towson.edu

Message subject: *Re: Moral panic analysis*

Peter,

Thank you for your comments and questions... they are really thought provoking and the kind of comments I was hoping to have. I really appreciate it. The majority of studies on moral panics are U.K. and U.S.A. based. While many of these studies are done by academics, many are also references to moral panics in the press and do not necessarily follow the traditional approach from Cohen, etc... I continue the literature review... and thank you for the additional references.

I agree with attempting to locate the processes of a moral panic in news journalism and many people were part of the phenomenon from start to finish providing an interesting take. The functioning of the media depends on the ability to create sensationalist news in the way you describe. I did conduct participant observation among politicians and reporters, mostly among print journalists. There was a consistent desire to find the type of stories that you describe, especially from television reporters.

And, the scenario that you describe about ‘serious experts getting steamrolled’ was witnessed often as media producers found a multitude of ways to keep the story active. The attempt to create a more ‘nuanced’ take on what was occurring by giving voice to drug experts and the like was consistently forfeited at the expense of an interview with a shocked parent or fellow student.

md

Matthew Durlington (Towson University)

mdurlington@towson.edu

Message subject: *Re: Moral panic analysis*

Daniel,

Thanks for the questions. In a course I teach on moral panics students are asked to identify different events and assess whether or not they meet certain criteria to identify them as moral panics or not. More than often, the ‘don’ts’ as you state are more frequent but often provide fruitful discussion...you know what something is by what it is not, so to speak. Tracking what makes an event not manifest as a moral panic is intriguing. I think it relates to your point about news values and the different coverage of events like the Asian Tsunami and Rwandan genocide respectively. While I would never align those two events with what occurred in this suburb, it was stated frequently in the research that the sensationalism of teenagers dying of a drug supposedly foreign to their lifestyle and community kept attention on the suburb. This overwhelming coverage was to the detriment of media coverage of heroin overdose deaths in other parts of the larger Dallas metroplex and I do address that and its racial, class and spatial implications. So, yes, for me there are definite ethnographic insights when observing why a moral panic may manifest in one place and not another.

md

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)

jpostill@usa.net

Message subject: *e-seminar ends Tuesday 9 pm GMT*

Dear All

Just a note to remind that our present discussion of Matthew Durlington’s moral panics paper ends tomorrow (Tuesday) at 9 pm GMT.

Best wishes

John

Deborah Woodell (Rowan University)

woodell@rowan.edu

Message subject: *e-seminar ends Tuesday 9 pm GMT*

<Tracking what makes an event not manifest as a moral panic is intriguing.>

They were panicked in Boston a few weeks ago when some little electronic signs advertising a cartoon TV show began showing up around the city. But they turned up elsewhere in the US, including Philadelphia, with nary a blip on the panic radar screen.

Deb

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Deborah Woodell
Adjunct, journalism
Rowan University
Glassboro, NJ

Matthew Durlington (Towson University)

mdurlington@towson.edu

Message subject: *Re: Moral panic analysis*

Exactly Deborah... a difference between a momentary panic tied to a consistent 'culture of fear' post 9/11 and the operation of a contained moral panic.

A pretty bad 'guerilla' ad campaign on top of that...

md

Matthew Durlington (Towson University)

mdurlington@towson.edu

Message subject: *Re: Moral panic analysis*

Earlier on in the discussion John Postill posted a query regarding social dramas that I would like to address briefly:

>From John: I was wondering whether in addition to a moral panic, there wasn't also a 'social drama' (Turner 1974, 1996 [1957]) going on at critical stages of this process? A sub- or parallel process perhaps? You will recall that for Turner, a social drama has the following phases:

1. Breach (of normal relations obtaining within a social/political field)
2. Crisis (accusations are rife, action-sets emerge, etc)

3. Redressive action (wrongdoers put things right)
4. Reintegration or schism (among the opposed factions)

Response: I think this is an incredibly useful way to distinguish certain events that may appear to have all of the traits of a 'moral panic' but do not necessarily fit the criteria for that particular model which can often be quite limiting.

Turner's work on liminality, performance and social dramas is incredibly useful (at least for me) in attempting to locate and explain sequences of cultural action. The concept of liminality especially. In fact, as John suggests above a synthesis of the analytical models of social dramas and moral panics could prove quite useful as they have many similarities. If anything, I believe Turner's notion of the social drama is much more inclusive than moral panics. Perhaps the only distinction between the two would be the primary media component in moral panics that is not a necessity in Turner's conceptualization. I think the most intriguing aspect of John's suggestion is to consider certain points in the development of a moral panic as social dramas. I have utilized Hall's notion of 'discourse convergence' and 'problem amplification' to describe moments of interaction between different individuals and the institutions that they represent broadly. I think the idea of possibly revisiting this to perhaps describe some moments as social dramas may be more productive due to the fact that it could operate on a continuum between individuals interacting in a conversation and large public displays...if that would be a correct utilization of the concept?!?

md

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)

jpostill@usa.net

Message subject: *Discussion open to all*

Dear All

We've come to the end of the e-seminar. Many thanks to Matthew Durlington for his paper on moral panics in suburban Texas and to Chas Critcher for his discussant's comments (Chas has been unable to participate further but has kindly promised to post some additional references on moral panics sometime next week). Many thanks, too, to those of you who've posted.

Our next presenter will be Philipp Budka (Vienna) this coming 17-24 April with a working paper titled "Indigenous media technologies in Ontario, Canada".

Best wishes

John