

**Response to Matthew Durington's "Moral Panics in Suburban Texas"
for the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
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By Chas Critcher (Sheffield Hallam University)**

Dear all,

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

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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 Durington'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 went only 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

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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.