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Moral Panics, Jimmy Savile and Social Work: A 21st Century Morality Tale
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We live in a world that is said to be full of risk, danger and threat. Every day, a new social issue emerges to assail our sensibilities, often accompanied by the cry: What's to be done? Who's to blame? On each occasion, there is an assumption that things are getting worse: that our society, communities and very lives are becoming more risky and more dangerous. In the 1980s and 1990s, panics focused on issues such as dangerous dogs, mugging, video games, satanic abuse and child sexual abuse. More recently, they have centred on elder abuse, people trafficking, the internet and welfare scroungers. In the midst of this, claims of historical sexual and physical abuse have taken centre-stage.

We have [examined many of these issues](#) over the last 18 months or so, in seminars, journal articles and social media, as part of an ESRC-sponsored seminar series. This article explores the moral panic focused on the (now dead) media celebrity, Jimmy Savile. Arguably, it is the fact that he is dead that has allowed this issue to take hold to the extent that it has today. We will discuss why we see the 'Jimmy Savile affair' as a very particular morality tale for social work, with consequences for all of us, academics, policy makers, practitioners and citizens alike. First, however, a reminder of what a moral panic is...

In his 1972 book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Stan Cohen used the furore around the battles between 'Mods' and 'Rockers', on the beaches of the South of England, in the 1960s as a case study to explore how moral panics operate. He observed the following process in action:

- 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 stylized 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.
- The condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

He went on to make a number of key observations. Moral panics are not, he claimed, total fabrications; there is always something at the heart of a panic that is real and concerning. This does not, however, mean that there are no fabrications within a moral panic. In their 1994 analysis, Goode and Ben Yehuda asserted that moral panics are always disproportionate, and evidence may be fabricated in support of any cause celebre. Goode and Ben Yehuda are especially interested in the political nature of moral panics. They ask:

- Why do certain social problems become moral panics and not others?
- Whose values and whose interests are expressed by the moral panic?

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- What is the role of the media and the state in a moral panic?
- Why do moral panics die out, and what is their long-term impact?

Critics of the idea of moral panics argue that the concept is too limiting: that moral regulation is always with us, or that 'moral crusade' is a better description. We believe that the term is less important than its consequences; moral panics are almost always negative, as we will demonstrate.

Sir Jimmy Savile OBE (1926-2011) was, in his lifetime, a high profile radio and television presenter, media personality and major fundraiser for charity. Although there were some unsubstantiated allegations of indecent assault made against him while he was alive, in the two years since his death, Savile has come to be known as one of the UK's most prolific sex offenders, with claims of historical abuse going back 60 years, involving the BBC, a number of care homes and schools and as many as 33 NHS institutions. When the NSPCC and Metropolitan Police published their joint report in January 2013, 450 people had made complaints against Savile; since the publication of Operation Yewtree's report, 10 additional public figures have been investigated by the police and one (the broadcaster, Stuart Hall) has been given a prison sentence.

The social issue here is clear enough, but why should it be seen as a moral panic? There is little doubt that the story has been presented in a 'stylized fashion', or that people have 'manned the moral barricades'. The press, media and public interest in this story has been phenomenal; fellow celebrities, politicians and members of the public have been queuing up to say that they always thought there was something 'creepy' about Savile (e.g. Bruce Forsyth and Paul McCartney, 23 November 2012), and rarely has a week gone by without another revelation concerning his past conduct. We are told that he was a 'necrophiliac' (former colleague, Paul Gambaccini, 23 October 2012) and that he 'groomed a nation' (Metropolitan police commander, Peter Spindler, 11 January 2013). Time will tell how many of the complaints made against Savile are upheld; given that he is no longer alive, it will be difficult to prove these one way or another. But it is important to highlight that the Yewtree report, *Giving Victims a Voice*, is full of scare-mongering, exaggeration and elision, as allegations are presented as 'facts' and accusations become 'offences', held to be incontrovertibly true. Moral aspects are also to the fore. Through the telling and retelling of the Savile story, we are reminded that children are innocents who must be protected from the adult world of sex; that women are passive, sexually submissive creatures who are also in need of protection; and that men are predatory, powerful and not to be trusted, especially when they are (a) celebrities and (b) doing good deeds.

This is not to excuse sexual abuse or to minimise the harm it may cause. Nor is it to suggest that there is no need for society to protect the vulnerable or champion those with few resources, economic, social and cultural. Rather it is to argue that scares such as the one

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surrounding Jimmy Savile are essentially conservative: they uphold a particular (overwhelmingly negative) view of human nature and they have the effect, both intended and unintended, of increasing fear and anxiety. Writing about moral panics, Jock Young argues that responses to social issues and anxieties 'sometimes expressed in terms of demonization, sometimes with humanitarian undertones' may be 'grossly disproportionate to the event' (2009: 13). The suggestion that any single individual could have 'groomed a nation' is one such example. Moral panics also draw attention away from the social and structural dimensions of problems in society; it can be no accident that the Jimmy Savile affair emerged at a time of acute social anxiety, with high levels of concern being expressed about public trust, and in particular, about the behaviour of politicians, bankers and the press. By focusing on Savile, what were we not looking at?

Moral panics matter. They matter especially for those of us in social work, because we are charged with protecting and supporting the vulnerable in society. Moral panics encourage practice that is risk-averse and that anticipates the worst in others, especially men. An edited volume in social work, edited by Jim Wild (2013), illustrates this clearly. The book's foreword is by Camila Batmanghelidjh, founder of the Place2Be and Kids Company. She states that children across the world 'continue to be violated at an epidemic rate' and that children 'deserve better' (page 9). They do, but this book may not be the way to achieve this. Instead, the book contains a series of scares about children – childhood obesity, violent entertainment, grooming of girls, sexualised culture, the internet and child sexual abuse. It's not that these issues are unimportant. It's that focusing on them to the exclusion of all else means that social work loses sight of the mundane, everyday reality of children's lives, including the increasing gap between rich and poor, the deterioration in public services, and the growth in child protection at the expense of child welfare, as highlighted by Eileen Munro (2011) in a recent review of child protection in England. This is the morality tale that we should be fore-fronting in an age of 'austerity' and welfare cuts and it is one that must be told now.

References:

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