in Adler, P.A. and P. Adler (eds.) "Constructions of Deviance: Social Power, Context, and Interaction", Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth / Thomson Learning, 2003 16

Moral Panics

The Case of Satanic Day Care Centers

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DeYoung takes us through the ups and downs of a moral panic in her analysis of the Satanic day care scare. After describing this concept and lodging it in the deviance literature, she takes us through the sequential escalation, peak, and eventual decline of this scare that gripped the public attention and divided whole communities on themselves, alarming families and ruining the careers of child care professionals. deYoung traces the involvement of various kinds of moral entrepreneurs, legislators, and the media, showing how these intentional actors interfaced with chance elements of timing to move the panic along. In so doing, she notes the role of social workers, mental health professionals, attorneys, and law enforcement officers, moral entrepreneurs also highlighted in the previous two selections: Reinarman's professional interest groups and Tuggle and Holmes' knowledge class. This article shows the fervor that can sweep people up and the way it becomes a monolithic juggernaut, rolling over everything in its path.

The term "moral panic" was coined by Cohen (1972) to describe a collective response, generated by unsettling social strain and incited and spread by interest groups, toward persons who are actively transformed into "folk devils" and then treated as threats to dominant social interests and values. Through the use of highly emotive claims and fear-based appeals, a moral panic tends to orchestrate cultural consent that something must be done, and quickly, to deal with this alleged threat. The increased social control that typically follows from such consent ends up preserving and reasserting the very hegemonic values and interests that purportedly are being undermined by the folk devils. A moral panic, then, serves a distinct stabilizing function at a time of unsettling social strain.

Why and how a moral panic arises, the types of people it demonizes, and the methods by which it ends up defining what Durkheim (1938) refers to as the normative contours and moral boundaries of a given society at any historical moment have been of considerable interest to sociologists. The concept has been used to analyze, among other things, the witch-hunts in Europe and America (Ben-Yehuda 1980; Erikson 1966); temperance movements and drug

panics (Goode 1990; Gusfield 1963; Wilkins 1994); anti-pornography and censorship crusades (Greek and Thompson 1992; Shuker 1986); the mugging and garrotting scares of the 19th century (Adler 1996; Sindall 1987); and law and order campaigns throughout the western world (King 1987; Williams 1993; Zatz 1987).

The term also is used to describe the collective response to new folk devils who were demonized in the 1980s—day care providers who, it was claimed, were abusing their very young charges in satanic rituals that included such horrific practices as blood-drinking, cannibalism, and human sacrifices. Between 1983 and 1991, in fact, over a hundred day care centers in major urban areas and small towns across the country were investigated for what quickly came to be known as satanic ritual abuse (Nathan and Snedeker 1995). These investigations created deep and often irreparable breaches in the communities where they occurred and resulted in scores of arrests, often long and costly criminal trials, many convictions despite the absence of any corroborating and material evidence, usually draconian prison sentences and, over recent years, many reversals of those convictions upon appeal (deYoung 1994).

The satanic day care scare had all of what Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) set out as the defining characteristics of a moral panic: it was widespread, overreactive, volatile, hostile, and largely irrational. But another look at this moral panic, and at the day care cases that are the stuff of it, reveals some interesting refinements that are needed in classical moral panic theory if it is to retain its explanatory and analytical power in the contemporary social world.

It is the purpose of this present article to offer that look. First, the article presents an overview of the satanic day care moral panic. Then, it uses data from a sample of 15 day care cases, some more notorious than others, to advance and illustrate a discussion of the areas of classic moral panic theory in need of refinement and updating. It should be noted that for the purposes of this article, a day care case was included in the sample if it met all of the following criteria: (1) an investigation led to the arrest of one or more day care provider; (2) allegations of satanic ritual abuse; that is, of the sexual abuse of children carried out during, or as part of, the ceremonial worship of Satan were actively investigated and publicly reported, even if they were not introduced into criminal trial; and (3) there are sufficient archival data in the form of court transcripts, legal briefs, investigative reports, interview transcripts, and local and national news articles to assess the case. Information that further identifies the 15 cases in the sample is presented in Table 1.

THE SATANIC DAY CARE MORAL PANIC

A basic analysis of any moral panic must account for its timing, target and trigger, content, spread, and denouement (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). Each of these factors will be examined in turn to provide a necessarily brief overview of the satanic day care moral panic of the 1980s.

Table 1 Day Care Center, Year of Investigation Initiation, and Location

Day Care Center	Year	Location
McMartin	1983	Manhattan Beach, CA
Country Walk	1984	Miami, FL
Small World	1984	Niles, MI
Fells Acres	1984	Malden, MA
Georgian Hills	1984	Memphis, TN
Rogers Park Jewish Community	1984	Chicago, IL
Manhattan Ranch	1984	Manhattan Beach, CA
Craig's Country	1985	Clarksville, MD
Felix's	1985	Carson City, NV
East Valley YMCA	1985	El Paso, TX
Glendale Montessori	1987	Stuart, FL
Old Cutler	1989	Miami, FL
Little Rascals	1989	Edenton, NC
Faith Chapel	1989	San Diego, CA
Fran's	1991	Austin, TX

Timing of the Moral Panic

By the 1980s, a number of social, ideological, professional, and political forces had contributed to a growing cultural anxiety about satanic menaces to children (Richardson, Best, and Bromley 1991; Victor 1993). From concerns about demonic influences in heavy metal music, fantasy role-playing games, tarot cards and ouija boards; to urban legends about mysterious satanists abducting fair-haired, blue-eyed children from shopping malls; to rumors of covert satanic cults filming child pornography; to tales about child sex rings, that decade was rife with "mini-moral panics" about satanic menaces to children, and ripened by them for more.

Target and Trigger of the Moral Panic

Coincident with that concern about the protection of children was another one about their daily care. The economic strains that made participation in the market economy a necessity, and the ideological force of the women's movement that made it an increasingly accessible alternative to unpaid housework, combined in that decade to put more and more women with young children into the labor market. In 1980, in fact, a record 45% of them were working outside of the home and using public and private day care centers for daily child care (Hofferth and Phillips 1987).

Most working parents were doing so with more than a little anxiety, however, and considered day care centers a change for the worse from the stay-at-home child care of their parents' generation (Hutchison 1992). That anxiety

was heightened by the impact of other types of economic strains. Deep cuts in federal funding that over half of the public day care centers had received just a few years before closed down many of them, and left the remaining centers with high enrollment fees, too many enrollees and, because of low wages, too few providers and high staff turnover (Hofferth and Phillips 1987). Trapped as they were between necessity and contingency, working parents reluctantly began transforming the almost sacred covenantal duty of caring for their young children into businesslike contractual arrangements with day care providers.

The tension created by this imbrication of covenant and contract made that most innocuous of social institutions, the local day care center, the target of a moral panic. But a trigger was yet needed, some kind of spark that in the words of Adler (1996) "would link ethereal sentiment to focused activity"(p. 262).

That spark was lit in 1983 at the McMartin Preschool. A 2.5 year-old enrollee made a statement, vaguely suggestive of sexual abuse, that eventually was worked into an allegation of satanic ritual abuse by social workers who already had some experience as claims makers in the mini-moral panics about satanic menaces to children (deYoung 1997).

Content of the Moral Panic

Eventually, 369 more current and past enrollees of the McMartin Preschool were identified as victims. Their claims, elicited over repeated and suggestive interviews by social workers now convinced of a satanic influence in the case, came to define the still unfamiliar term of satanic ritual abuse and, in doing so, gave the ensuing moral panic its content. The children described, among other ghastly things, the ritualistic ingestion of urine, feces, blood, semen, and human flesh; the disinterment and mutilation of corpses; the sacrifices of infants; and orgies with their day care providers, costumed as devils and witches, in classrooms, tunnels under the center, and in car washes, airplanes, mansions, cemeteries, hotels, ranches, neighborhood stores, local gyms, churches, and hot air balloons. In the accusatorial atmosphere of this nascent moral panic, they named not only the seven McMartin day care providers as their satanic abusers, but local businesspeople and city officials, world leaders, television and film stars, and even their own family members (Nathan and Snedeker 1995).

Spread of the Moral Panic

The same social strains that accounted for the timing of the onset of the satanic day care moral panic also created an engendering environment for its rapid spread across the country. The role of interest, professional and grassroots groups in sustaining both the drama and exigency of this moral panic, however, cannot be underestimated.

As in all contemporary moral panics, the news media emerged as a major interest group. The McMartin Preschool case, and all the "little McMartins" as the well over a hundred ensuing cases it triggered were euphemistically

called, fit all of the criteria for newsworthiness set out by Soothill and Walby (1991). They had ample complexity to warrant daily coverage from different angles; nearly intolerable horror to evoke and sustain intense emotional responses; enough familiarity in terms of location, key claims-makers, and even prime suspects to spark interest, real enough folk devils in the roles of day care providers to demonize; and sufficient exigency to elicit feelings that something must be done, and to focus action in doing it.

The news media hardly were monolithic as an interest group, however. While the nearly hysterical tone of reportage set in local coverage of the McMartin Preschool case was mimicked in local news media in other cases across the country, as well as in the mass media, it was tempered considerably in the national press and quelled completely in a few investigative reports, in large circulation newspapers (Charlier and Downing 1988; Reinhold 1990). And, as both the McMartin Preschool case and many, although certainly not all, of the other satanic day care cases that followed began to fall apart as criminal charges were dismissed, children recanted, or day care providers were exonerated in courts of law, the tone of even local news coverage changed to one of skepticism, criticism, and even excoriation (Sauer 1993; Shaw 1990).

One eventual target of that excoriation was the very professionals who, in the role of what Becker (1963: 145) so aptly described as "moral entrepreneurs," had triggered and spread the satanic day care moral panic. During its nearly decade-long duration, with many of their activities funded and endorsed by the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect, these social workers, mental health professionals, attorneys and law enforcement officers acted as the chief claims-makers in not only the local and national news media, but also on network television talk shows and primetime news magazines. The social workers and mental health professionals, in particular, became captains of a burgeoning "sexual abuse industry," as Goodyear-Smith (1993) referred to it, and took to the lecture circuit, addressed child protection conferences, conducted workshops, consulted with professionals involved in other cases, and testified as expert witnesses in the criminal and civil trials of the day care providers.

Their claims about satanic day care centers also were voiced in sworn testimony in high profile government hearings. The social worker who interviewed most of the children in the McMartin Preschool case, for example, added a touch of conspiracy to the satanic day care cases when in late 1984 she testified before Congress that an organized operation of "child predators" was using day care centers "as a ruse for a large, unthinkable network of crimes against children. If such an operation involves child pornography, or selling children, as is frequently alleged, it may have greater financial, legal and community resources at its disposal than those attempting to expose it" (Brozan 1984: A-21).

Rhetoric like that may be enough to ignite a moral panic, but rhetoric backed up by "facts" is more combustible (Best 1990). To make more persuasive claims, both about the satanic day care problem and their expertise in it, professionals developed and widely disseminated a wholly synthetic diabolism

out of materials haphazardly borrowed from eclectic sources on satanism, the occult, mysticism, paganism and witchcraft (Mulhern 1991). They constructed "indicator lists" to assist other professionals, both here and abroad, in identifying child victims, and "symptom lists" to guide the course of their therapy. Little of what passed for facts about satanic ritual abuse in day care centers was the result of well designed and controlled empirical studies or even systematic case studies, and little of the exchange of facts was taking place in the formal arena of peer-reviewed professional journals, but a burgeoning critical literature was, thus deeply dividing the professional field into claims-makers and counterclaims-makers, believers, and skeptics.

Parents of the allegedly victimized children were unabashed believers, and they constitute the grassroots group that spread the satanic day care moral panic. Like the professionals, and sometimes in conjunction with them, the parents were very vocal and, given their outrage and grief, very pitiable claims-makers. Many of them became keenly politicized as well. Some of the parents in the Little Rascals case, for example, formed an organization called Citizens Against Child Abuse to raise money to assist prosecutors in bringing the seven day care providers to trial. Believe the Children, a group formed by a coterie of McMartin Preschool parents, established a clearinghouse on satanic ritual abuse replete with a speakers' bureau, support groups for parents, police, and prosecutors involved in other day care cases, and a referral list of sympathetic professionals.

As another example, a legislative group called CLOUT was formed by parents in the aftermath of the Manhattan Ranch case. It successfully lobbied the California legislature for "child-friendly" changes in criminal trial procedures in which young children testified as witnesses, changes that were well into place when the long-delayed McMartin Preschool case finally came to trial. The rapid adoption across the country of these and other courtroom innovations, such as shielding child witnesses by allowing them to testify on videotape, closed-circuit television, behind screens, or with their backs to the defendants have not been without legal controversy since they violate the defendants' First and Sixth Amendment rights to a public trial in which accusatory witnesses can be confronted (Montoya 1995).

Denouement of the Moral Panic

The satanic day care moral panic effectively ended in 1991 but its denouement is no more a matter of coincidence than was its onset nearly a decade before. Several factors contributed to its demise. The overweening cultural anxiety about satanic menaces to children largely had been debunked and many of its most vocal claims-makers had retreated into silence (Victor 1993). Changing economic conditions over the decade only increased the number of women in the labor force and the concomitant increase in the use of day care may have worked to integrate this service even more thoroughly into the culture, thus reducing the conflict associated with its use (Hofferth and Phillips 1987).

Changes in day care over the decade of the moral panic, and largely in reaction to it, also acted to pare down any residual conflict about its use. State licensing agencies tightened day care regulations and by legislative fiat were given more teeth to enforce them. As a result, allegations of any kind were promptly, even aggressively, investigated and the licenses of day care centers in compliance were suspended or revoked. In the immediate wake of the Georgian Hills case, for example, 15 local day care centers were investigated for sexual abuse (Mydans 1994), and in the months after the McMartin Preschool case was made public, nine other centers in the small bedroom community of Manhattan Beach were closed down when investigations were launched (Fisher 1989). Significant day care reforms also took place on a state level. After the Country Walk case, as another example, the Governor of Florida held public hearings on the accessibility and quality of day care, and then asked the state legislature for $30 million to reform the system (Ynclan 1984).

In the accusatorial atmosphere of the moral panic, day care providers also took measures to protect themselves from false allegations (Bordin 1996). They installed video cameras to record their activities, opened up private spaces to public view, and kept physical contact with their young charges to a necessary minimum. They adopted open-door policies and invited parents to drop in without notice to talk with staff, observe their children or even spend time with them. The net effect of these and other changes was not only to make day care centers more accessible to worried parents, but more like families, thus further minifying the anxiety about their use (deYoung 1997).

What also certainly played a role in the denouement of the moral panic was the fact that the satanic day care cases, so reprehensible in the court of public opinion, nonetheless did not fare well in courts of law. . . . [I]n many cases in the sample charges were dropped against day care providers and convictions eventually overturned. Although this is certainly due to the fact that the public requires a lower standard of evidence, for lack of a better term, to develop an impression about a case than a court does to adjudicate it, the considerable clash between public opinion and judicial reaction made it difficult to sustain the drama and the exigency of the satanic day care moral panic.

Finally, the schism within the claims-making professional groups that widened over the years of the moral panic also played a role in its demise. The satanic day care center was the site upon which an almost gothic professional struggle for social, political, and moral meaning had taken place, yet no consensus about that meaning was ever reached. The intra-professional dispute about the satanic day care cases, the inter-professional criticism of how they were handled, coupled with the growing public discontent with the expansion of clinical authority into families, institutions, and courts of law very well may have led to the construction of a new folk devil—the overzealous, shortsighted professional, bent on proving sexual abuse of any kind—and a new moral panic, colloquially known as "the backlash," now being directed against them (Myers 1994).

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DIFFERENTIAL SOCIAL POWER

17

The Saints and the Roughnecks

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Chambliss' description of the Saints and the Roughnecks shows how the power of social class can operate to facilitate the definition of some groups as deviant and others as not. Although members of the former group actually engage in more delinquent acts than the latter, the Saints are perceived as "good boys," merely engaging in typical adolescent hijinks. Because of their higher class background, their behavior is defined as socially normative, enabling the police, teachers, community members, and parents to look the other way. On the other hand, the Roughnecks, who come from the "wrong side of the tracks," are perceived to be troublemakers, rabblerousers, and delinquents. We see conflict and labeling theories in effect here since social class is the determinant of society's reactions. Behavior done by teenagers from upstanding, middle class families is tolerated, while similar behavior engaged in by lower class youth is reinforced as deviant. Once again, labels are applied based on status, not on patterns of behavior. The Roughnecks, thus, live up to society's expectations of them and continue into deviance.

Eight promising young men—children of good, stable, white, upper-middle-class families, active in school affairs, good pre-college students—were some of the most delinquent boys at Hanibal High School. While community residents and parents knew that these boys occasionally sowed a few wild oats, they were totally unaware that sowing wild oats completely occupied the daily routine of these young men. The Saints were constantly occupied with truancy, drinking, wild driving, petty theft, and vandalism. Yet not one was officially arrested for any misdeed during the two years I observed them.

This record was particularly surprising in light of my observations during the same two years of another gang of Hanibal High School students,