

Young People, Children and Childhood

Unearthing melodrama: Moral panic theory and the enduring characterisation of child trafficking

Introduction

The issue of child trafficking came to prominence in the early part of the twentieth century as international migrations of children became more visible attracting the attention of Non-Governmental Organisations, politicians, and the national news media. The trafficking of children however is not a new phenomenon, indeed in the late nineteenth century campaigners were successful in lobbying for an increase in the age of consent partially as a result of the media exposé of the 'white slave trade' orchestrated by the newspaper editor William Stead and the prominent social reformer Josephine Butler (Bristow 1978). The phenomenon of child trafficking has been previously characterised as a moral panic (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Cree, Clapton and Smith 2012). Moral panic theory goes some way towards explaining the conditions which provide fertile ground for the amplification of risk embedded in media representations, and policy discourses associated with child trafficking. This chapter will illustrate how the issue of child trafficking has been continues to be defined drawing on a model developed from the literary genre of melodrama. The chapter discusses the features of moral panic theory which are relevant to understanding the construction of child trafficking as a moral issue. In the concluding section of this chapter the implications of the construction of child trafficking are discussed.

What makes this a Moral Panic?

Moral panics theory was originally used to explain the crisis in policing of young people (Cohen 1972) and has been applied to many social issues in the intervening period (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Critcher 2003). Thompson (1998) identifies a number of common features of a moral panic: there is a campaign or a crusade over a period of time; the issues appeal to those who are concerned in some way about social breakdown; there is a lack of clarity in moral guidelines; politicians and the media are found to be at the head of public debates; and, finally, the real causes of the problems which give rise to a moral panic remain unaddressed. Factors of central importance in understanding an issue as a moral panic are that concerns about behaviour are met with increasing hostility, and the issue becomes publicly visible. The issue is represented in disproportionate terms in that the groups who agitate and push social concerns up the political and public agenda do so by constructing the issue as

good versus evil, and heighten sensitivity by focusing on the worst case scenario as if it were representative (Thompson 1998).

Moral panic theory as applied to child trafficking in the UK raises important issues as certain groups gain prestige and status, and have 'vested interests' in exposing and exaggerating levels of concern about particular issues. In the UK the NGOs which are party to national and international governmental anti-trafficking activities could be said to have a vested interest in terms of advancing their agendas and they have previously advocated measures based on single and extreme cases. This was also the case in the late nineteenth century. However, in defining an event as a moral panic the issue is subject to being always typecast in this way, potentially minimising the need for informed rigorous debate. The absence of an informed and academic debate on the subject has left an opportune space for the emergence and re-emergence of stories about child trafficking which have little basis in reality.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) applied a discussion of moral panic theory to a child trafficking event in Orleans in France in May 1969. The story was not true, it had arisen as a result of a number of other issues, which they trace to the publication of a fictional work called *Sex Slavery*. This depicted kidnapping and abduction in the changing rooms of a clothes store. The story then appeared in a French magazine; the rumours of a 'white slave trade' in girls spread a week later. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) also found that the opening of a new clothes shop which had dungeon-like fitting rooms contributed to the rumour. The story was given no credibility and yet the rumour continued to gather currency. At the beginning of June 1969 national newspapers, political groups and organisations began to denounce the rumours and despite allegations of a cover-up, bribery and corruption, within two months the rumour had all but disappeared (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994).

Moral panic theory has also previously been drawn on to explain the way in which the 'white slave trade' appeared on the nineteenth and twentieth century policy agendas in the UK (Derks 2000; Doezema 2001; Doezema 2002) and in the Netherlands (De Vries 2005). Doezema (2001) compares discourses of 'white slavery' which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century with more recent campaigning on trafficking, and reports on the similarities in the moral agendas of these organisations and their aims in respect of abolishing prostitution and restricting the migration of females. The narratives of these nineteenth century discourses have been highly influential in characterising prostitution and the *white slave trade*. Methods used by the reform campaigners of the late nineteenth century had a strong influence on feminist politics and campaigning, particularly those

used by the reformer Josephine Butler and her supporters including the infamous editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, William Stead who ran the infamous exposé: *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* Series (Walkowitz 1992). Melodramatic narratives in Stead's Maiden Tribute series in 1885 constructed: "virtuous heroines sold into sexual slavery by the despotically mercenary drives of villainous pimps" (Hadley 1995, p.211). In more recent work Cree, Clapton and Smith (2012) examine this event and the establishment of the Child Exploitation and Online CEOPS in relation to moral panic theory. The emphasis then as now is on the sexual exploitation aspects of trafficking; other more mundane and less sensationalist reasons for trafficking, domestic and, agricultural work for example, tend to be overshadowed. There are reasons for this which are explained drawing on the theory of melodramatic tactics (Hadley 1995) which reveals how narratives of child trafficking tend to have a stereotypical tragic child victim, who is forcibly separated from their family, and in need of protection from dangerous criminals who aim to deceive and exploit them. Melodramatic tactics according to Hadley (1995) are characterised by portrayals of six key themes common to the genre of melodrama: familial narratives of dispersal and reunion; visual rendering of bodily torture and criminal conduct; atmospheric menace and providential plotting; expressions of highly charged emotions; and a tendency to personify absolutes like good and evil. Melodramatic tactics are evident in the nineteenth century social purity campaigning activities, serialised style and pseudo-factual-story-telling to convey to an unsuspecting public the tragic situations of victims through emotional appeals and righteous indignation. They also have, in some narratives a class dimension where the aristocracy is the enemy, as it is they who defile the innocent working class girls. This was a popularised late nineteenth century protest format, and peculiar to social purity groups in this period (Walkowitz 1992). These tactics are evident in the campaigning publications, *The Shield* and *The Storm Bell*, although less so in the reports of *The Times* which tended towards the immigration and economic exploitation aspects. The concept of melodramatic tactics has further analytical value as applied to contemporary policy and legislation about the issue of child trafficking .

As well as highlighting the more sensationalist aspects of the issue i.e. the exploitation and harm, the construction of risk in this way prioritises certain interventions over others. Potential child trafficking scenarios gain status and determine interventions which might ordinarily be intrusive and disruptive to families. The means are therefore justified by the ends. In policy and practice children arriving into the UK attract suspicion and interest from immigration and child safeguarding officials. It is not viewed as essential to have proof or evidence of child trafficking. The fact that families come into the UK as asylum seekers or refugees and children come in to the UK unaccompanied is enough to arouse the interest of officials. In their efforts to stop trafficking, advocates and anti-trafficking campaigners have thus legitimised policy, and practice is focussed on all groups of migrant children. The risk is also

amplified and extended across groups of children, and as illustrated the story gathers momentum and credibility through the use and application of extreme examples to prove a case.

In relation to the causes of child trafficking, the policy approaches are overly reliant on simplistic demand/supply explanations of child trafficking which are particularly associated with trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation and, as a result, draw heavily on the language of child protection where children are constructed as witless victims. This position obscures the need for a more detailed analysis of children's experiences: the ways in which children arrive into the UK, closer examination of the relationships between children and the people who bring them; and the variety of factors which promote children's migrations. UK policy approaches to date towards migrant children coming without or with their families reflect a desire to protect and sustain a rigid asylum and immigration system, a position which has also been adopted in respect of the issue of child trafficking. These measures are ostensibly designed to stop independent migrations because of the potential risks of trafficking and future exploitation. Child migration is therefore understood as a problem because children are separated from their parents, families and communities, this distance between and separateness from origins is perceived in policy terms as being laden with risks and vulnerabilities.

Although the activities of the nineteenth century social puritans and current anti-trafficking activities might be explained as a moral panic (Cohen 1972) or as a moral crusade (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994), these does not fully account for the way in which the risks have been constructed and reconstructed across the historically different contexts. The amplification of risk is a central and enduring feature of moral panic theory despite critiques that the moral panic research might have less relevance and applicability in terms of explaining social issues because of media communication and technological advances (McRobbie and Thornton 1995).

In Sharma's (2004) critique of anti-trafficking campaigns and the role of NGOs she examines the feminist discourses and demonstrates how these shape the representation of female migrations with a criminalised discourse:

"...when moral panics of illegal migration, border control, and heightened criminality of migrants are deconstructed, a serious disjuncture emerges between women's accounts of migration and the dominant rhetoric of trafficking" (p.55).

Melodramatic tactics:

19th Century discourses and 21st Century discourses

Interview narratives from research conducted between 2005-2007

Legislation which lacks an evidence base

Many of the references to risks found in NGO consultations about child trafficking are uncritically reproduced in policy documents and guidance. Statements about the *hidden harm* and the potentially *significant numbers* of children thought to be at risk of trafficking are also commonplace in the policy discourses. The true scale of the issue is unknown but commentators and politicians have argued that it is potentially enormous. For example in October 2004 during a parliamentary debate on the subject of child trafficking, Mr. John Bercow the MP for Buckingham suggested that parliamentary attention had been “*woefully inadequate to the scale of the challenge that we face*” (John Bercow cited in Hansard 21st October 2004 c.1116). Bercow illustrates the dangers parents are exposing their children to, and argued that it was the responsibility of migrants already in Britain to do everything within their power to prevent such migrations in future:

“The high profile cases of Victoria Climbié, who was trafficked to the UK by her aunt in order to commit benefit fraud... is the tip of the iceberg....Parents must be made aware that they are not sending their children to a better life when they put them in the hands of traffickers. New communities in Britain can help by sending the messages to their contacts in the developing world about the grim prospect that awaits the victims of trafficking” (John Bercow cited in Hansard 21st October 2004 c.1117).

In the UK child trafficking policy discourses are underpinned with *harm prevention* and *risk management* narratives. More recently, in welfare policies generally the *victim* has become a high priority whilst certain highly valued ideologies of childhood persist in wider policy discourses. The

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values and priorities of the policy discourses in terms of child trafficking are emphasised in the narratives of home and family and loss and betrayal. The crisis narratives evident in child trafficking policy-making discourses also convey a need for urgent and immediate action: *something must be done*.

It is clear in the policy discourses that the migration of children poses individual risks to children and wider risks in terms of the UK's border security, and in terms of their vulnerability to being sexually exploited. Critically, child trafficking has come to be understood as being about wider societal and particularly sexual threats to children and more specifically about: *"innocent and helpless victims"* (Buckland 2008). This way of talking about child trafficking minimises structural explanations and promotes individual ones. In relation to trafficking in women and children the domination of a *"victim trope"* together with the positioning of men as either predators, abusers, exploiters or crime bosses, legitimates restrictive and punitive policies, again an approach which underestimates the structural factors which lead to migrations (Buckland 2008, p. 43).

These policies were all developed within a wider political context of increased border control and national security, and so various policy and legislative measures were enacted in order to address the perceived threat of immigration and international terrorism. Additionally, the economic threats to the UK of unchecked immigration were emphasised. The immigration context of policy-making has come in for sharp criticism from anti-trafficking organisations and agencies, and there are widely expressed concerns that these responses do not address the trafficking in children because of the hidden nature of the crime and the exploitation children are said to experience. The discourses which surround the development of child trafficking policies in the UK are characterised by perceptions of the potential exploitation of migrant children, particularly for commercial sexual exploitation. The vulnerability of migrant children, their victimhood and perceived risks in their migrations are thus enduring feature of UK child trafficking policy discourses. There have been some notable exceptions in the dominant discourse from individuals and state actors who challenge the view that child trafficking is a massive and hidden social problem, and, whilst these do bring some measured observations to policy debates, they remain minimised

Emphasis on immigration and 'safeguarding' at the expense of providing support to meet needs (Westwood 2012)

Traffickers are depicted as evil, criminal gangs (Cree, Clapton and Smith: baddies and goodies)

NGO and politicians

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Heightened concern and media stories :

The construction of risk in these child trafficking discourses appear in a specific format which is explained by drawing on the conceptual lens of *melodramatic tactics*.

1. Identify some of the key ingredients in your Moral Panic

In the nineteenth century: industrial capitalist expansion, together with technological developments promoted opportunities for international travel by women and children at a pace which had not previously been possible. This era also saw the development of feminist transnational advocacy networks that raised international awareness of social problems including the issue of the forced migrations of women and children, especially girls for prostitution in continental Europe. During this era the ideology of childhood promoted by social reformers and the social purity movement was that of a safe and protected childhood, which valued the innocence and purity of children.

The social purity movement was galvanised by the 'discovery' of the international white slave trade, and their campaigning materials of the period provided many accounts of the exploitation and rescue of girls and women travelling. From the perspectives of the social purity groups, the exposure of prostitution and the international trade in girls was perceived as potentially undermining the sanctity of the family, and as a threat to the health of the nation. The purity campaigners' main objective was to end the trafficking in girls and women who would, they argued, be ruined by the corruption of their innocence, their loss of status as virtuous females, and socio-economic marginalisation. The purity groups and organisations played a significant role in lobbying for legislative change to protect children from abuse and exploitation, but it was prostitution and the white slave trade which really interested them (Bristow 1978; Gorham 1978; Mulpetre 2005). Campaigning to end trafficking and prostitution coexisted alongside the ideological objectives of the social purity movement to moralise the fallen and punish the evil: "with outrage the governing emotion" (Bristow 1978 p.93).

Melodramatic tactics

When the trade in girls for the purposes of prostitution was exposed by Stead in the *Maiden Tribute* series, he drew on the popular melodramatic genre to illustrate the depravity and morally corrupt nature of the trade and those involved in it. Walkowitz (1992) examines the narratives of the *Maiden Tribute* series and illustrates the use of melodramatic tactics which, she argues were used to heighten public and political sensitivity to the issue of child prostitution and *white slavery*. The melodramatic themes are evident as the stealing of girls was constructed as the deception and corruption of the innocents, and a stereotypical tragic victim who had been tricked by false promises of marriage or work.

Melodrama

The Melodramatic genre is defined as: “*a dramatic piece characterized by exaggerated characters and a sensational plot intended to appeal to the emotions*” (Oxford English Dictionary 2010).

Derived from the combination of music and drama which featured in stage productions in the nineteenth century, melodrama was intended for a popular, unified audience with shared values and morals.

Melodrama did not fit the traditional literary, cultural or artistic genres of the nineteenth century, and became associated with ‘popular’ and ‘sensational’. The term ‘melodrama’ however was not well regarded and was the most insulting label which could be applied to stage productions. The musical element was used to give dramatic effect but dwindled, and eventually disappeared (Smith 1973).

Melodramatic tactics

Hadley (1995) drew on the literary theory of melodrama to analyse how certain groups and individuals portrayed social issues through the nineteenth century. melodramatic tactics are characterised by portrayals of six key themes common to the genre of melodrama ;

- Familial narratives of dispersal and reunion;
- visual rendering of bodily torture and criminal conduct;
- atmospheric menace
- providential plotting;
- expressions of highly charged emotions;
- a tendency to personify absolutes like good and evil;

The melodramatic mode contributed to the shaping of public opinion in late Victorian period and was a primary way in which social reformers challenged the government position on the age of consent and prostitution.

As (Hadley 1995, p.195) has shown in the campaigning for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Josephine Butler used melodramatic tactics which were a: *“hybrid of hierarchical and populist”*.

Melodrama has its origins in storytelling, and is of a specific nature; it relies on audience reaction; employs emotive language and is at its most persuasive when applied to universal themes: purity and danger, especially from a stranger; loss or separation from home and family and some suggestion of betrayal and injustice to an innocent (Hadley 1995). Today it is more often found in the soap opera genre, and in language of the popular press. It is also evident in other news media.

Melodrama characterises the exposé serialized in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885 (Bristow 1978; Gorham 1978; Walkowitz 1992; Hadley 1995).

In melodrama there are three connected elements:

“...secrecy, economic speculation and physical/sexual exploitation...estranged patriarchal families, wrenched apart by the mercenary evil doing of a villainous family member who has succumbed to the dissolute pleasures associated with secret market transactions” (Hadley 1995 p.199).

The story of child trafficking emerging in my analysis of child trafficking narratives clearly suggests that the conceptual lens of melodramatic tactics has some explanatory relevance. Of course the concept should not be used uncritically, as Sadoff (1998) suggests, Hadley's application and discussion of the melodramatic mode obscures other significant historical forces of change in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, such as industrialisation and imperialism. Despite this critique, the characteristics of melodrama and the employment of melodramatic tactics do provide analytical concepts for explaining the narrative strategies employed by the respondents and evidenced in the interview data.

Melodramatic plot

There are three forms of melodramatic plot; triumph, defeat and protest. In 'triumph' the story is presented simply in a way which inspires courage in the audience. The essence of the plot in defeat is that: *"human miseries are most affecting when they encompass sympathetic innocents who have done nothing to deserve them"* (Smith 1973 p.56). Underneath the essential form of protest in melodrama is an agenda which is designed to: *"stimulate political awareness, question established values, expose injustice, champion reform, fuel arguments ...and sometimes incite direct support for bloody revolution"* (Smith 1973 p.72). A common strategy in the melodrama of protest is the attempt to amplify concern through the creation of a 'blameless victim':

"to pinpoint a contemporary evil they set up a blameless hero as the victim of the system, and then subject him to such inhuman persecution that the audience explodes with indignation and demands the immediate repeal of laws which perpetuate such cruelties" (Smith 1973, p.75).

It is protest which best characterises the melodramatic elements of the narratives of child trafficking, as Smith (1973, p.72) points out, it: *"arouses righteous anger at the world's injustices unmitigated by the thought that we may also be to blame"* (Smith 1973, p.72). There were similar melodramatic themes in current child trafficking policy, and NGO campaigning materials. This was explicit in the interview narratives which exposed the damage done to children by trafficking. There was only a limited acknowledgement of the 'harms' and 'risks' associated with intractable problems of war, oppression and poverty that are characteristic features of the countries children originate from. The campaigning elements of the narratives were evident in terms of how interviewees described their

role and the way in which their agencies perceived that they were protecting children coming into the UK. Demands were made along the lines of *something must be done* to address this situation. Respondents claimed that they were *fighting battles* with not only evil depraved criminals but also with other agencies and organisations that let the side down and exposed vulnerable children to greater risks. The complexities of child migration seemed to be little understood and did not appear as important or relevant in the narratives; what was important was tackling the criminal activities of (criminalised) *others*. Global structural factors which influence migratory flows were avoided, minimised in the narratives.

The emphasis in the narratives was on tackling the crimes of exploitation and protecting, indeed rescuing, children from the clutches of criminal gangs. The wider context within which these narratives are situated is also important. In Hadley's analysis she highlights the ways in which the melodramatic tactics employed by the social puritans in late nineteenth century Britain allowed them to sidestep the 'normal' mechanism of Parliamentary debate and scrutiny:

"Indeed Butler's melodramatic tactics aimed to bring about genuine alterations in national law and policy in a manner that to some observers might have seemed evasive of conventional legislative procedure, such as parliamentary debate" (Hadley 1995, p.201).

In my study of narratives of child trafficking, respondents described the negative impact of children's separation from their families and parents. The examples used by respondents to illustrate cases incorporated visual rendering of bodily torture and criminal conduct. This was particularly evident when the participants made reference to the high profile death of Victoria Climbié and other extreme case examples. The explanations respondents used to explain the causes of the issue of child trafficking also illustrated the atmospheric menace in relation to the dangerous environment children travelled in and to. There were also references to providential plotting which were suggestive of planning and scheming by criminal gangs and methods and approaches which agencies used to address these. The respondents expressed their feelings about child trafficking articulating highly charged emotions. Finally, in examining who respondents thought was involved in child trafficking, there was a tendency to personify absolutes like good and evil.

The child trafficking narratives in my own research were loaded with expressions of excess emotions linked in some ways to the understanding of child trafficking as a crime. The narratives were constructed using language usually associated with the sexual exploitation of children and particular the notion of *grooming*. In policy discourses and interview narratives, child trafficking crimes against children were simplistically constructed as being committed against innocent children by evil villains, with outrage at this exploitation being a key way in which the crime of child trafficking was portrayed. The narrative strategies which underpin the melodrama of child trafficking seem to be structured in a way which support and sustain the involvement of networks of a range of NGO agencies in the policy-making arena, whose agenda is driven by outrage at injustices to children, especially exploitation and abuse.

These modern melodramatic child trafficking narratives are also found in the media exposures of child trafficking which are designed to scandalize and shock audiences.

This is hardly surprising, given that the media tend to rely upon anti-trafficking NGOs as 'authoritative' sources of information. These melodramatic tactics are also evident in parliamentary papers, which are also informed by NGO evidence and provide campaigners with ammunition to lobby for greater protection and ultimately restrictions on the migratory movements of children to the UK. The global social inequalities which push children into migration might be occasionally articulated, although this is often to a much lesser extent in the campaign materials, and the overwhelming emphasis is on exposing and re-exposing the crime, the villains and the suffering children experience

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- a. Scale of the problem and proportionality of the response
 - b. The conditions in which it took place
 - c. Folk devils
 - d. Claims-makers/moral entrepreneurs
 - e. Consequences of the Moral Panic
2. Discussion – locate this moral panic scenario in a wider theoretical discussion. Relevance to Social Work and Social Policy
 3. Conclusion (250)

Introduction

Child trafficking in late nineteenth century Britain

The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon

The Curious case of Adeline Tanner

Child trafficking in early twenty first century Britain

The characteristics of melodrama

- Familial narratives of dispersal and reunion
- Visual rendering of bodily torture and criminal conduct
- Atmospheric menace
- Expressions of highly charged emotions
- Tendency to personify absolutes like good and evil
- Providential plotting

Contemporary child trafficking policy and practice discourses

Discussion

Conclusion