

Folk devils without moral panics: discovering concepts in the sociology of evil

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Abstract

In this theoretical ‘think piece’, I question whether Stanley Cohen’s (1972) ‘folk devil’ and ‘moral panic’ concepts are as inseparable as current sociological and criminological research suggests. Thus far, the vast majority of crime and deviance scholars have treated the folk devil as just one sub-part of the moral panic concept, rather than considering it to be a distinct concept. Consequently, the social processes leading to the creation of folk devils have been largely under-theorized compared to the social processes underlying moral panics. I propose that folk devils and moral panics be conceptualized as two distinct social phenomena. I present evidence from news articles published in the *Toronto Star*, Canada’s largest circulated newspaper, which illustrates how individuals can be labeled as folk devils when moral panics are not taking place. I conclude by considering how a distinct, folk devil research program can contribute to studies in the sociology of ‘evil’.

Introduction

It has been four decades since the publication of Stanley Cohen’s (1972) now classic text, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. During this time, social scientists have invoked Cohen’s the moral panic concept to explain a diverse array of social phenomena including societal reactions to: muggings; gang violence; drug use; and corporate crime. In the opening chapter of his book, Cohen (1972) explains that a *moral panic* involves a situation where:

...a condition, episode or group of persons becomes 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, and or deteriorates and becomes more visible [Cohen, 1972:9].

In subsequent years, various scholars have provided similar definitions of moral panics. Hall and his colleagues (1978) define moral panics as “official” reactions to events that are “out of all proportion to the actual threat offered” (p.16). Goode and Ben- Yehuda (1994) understand moral panics to be periods of “...strong, widespread (although not necessarily universal) fear or concern that evil doings are afoot, that certain enemies of society are trying to harm some or all of the rest of us” (p.11). Social scientists agree that a key feature of moral panics is *distortion*. This occurs when media sources “exaggerate, grossly, the seriousness of events” (Cohen, 1972:31; see also Hall et al., 1978; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Cohen (1972) explains that such distortions can involve “...sensational headlines, the melodramatic vocabulary and the deliberate heightening of those elements in the story considered as news” (p.31). In more recent years, the moral panic concept has undergone rigorous critique (see McRobbie and Thornton, 1995;

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Ungar, 1992; Waddington, 1986). Despite considerable interest in the merits and viability of Cohen's (1972) moral panic model, surprisingly little attention has been paid, exclusively, to his *folk devil* concept.

Cohen (1972) defines *folk devils* as "social types" that serve as "visible reminders of what we should not be"² (p.10). Hall and colleagues (1978) define the folk devil as such:

He is the reverse image, the alternative to all we know: *the negation*. He is the fear of failure that is secreted at the heart of success, the danger that lurks inside security, the profligate figure by whom Virtue is constantly tempted, the tiny, seductive voice inside inviting us to feed rations [p.16].

Furthermore, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) understand the folk devil to be the "evil party" responsible for an action, or the "personification of evil" (p.28). Examples of folk devils that Cohen provides include members from several different youth sub-cultures: Teddy Boys; Mods, Rockers; Hells Angels; Skinheads; and Hippies (Cohen, 1972). Cohen (1972) connects his two concepts by noting that moral panics develop in response to the behaviour of folk devils.

Until now, the vast majority of crime and deviance scholars have assumed that folk devils exist only during times of moral panic. In turn, they have treated the folk devil as just one sub-part of the moral panic concept, rather than as a separate and distinct concept. As a result, the social processes that undergird folk devils have been given short shrift compared to the social processes that underlie moral panics. The consequence of this is that folk devils have remained largely under-theorized. In this theoretical 'think piece', I question whether folk devils and moral panics are as tightly bound as previous research suggests. I propose that we break from current tradition by *not* thinking about folk devils as being contingent upon moral panics. Instead, I suggest that we understand folk devils and moral panics to be two separate social phenomena. I present evidence which suggests that individuals can be labeled as folk devils regardless of whether or not a moral panic is taking place.

In the first part of this paper, I review social scientific literature on 'evil' and highlight some of the current limitations within the sociology of evil. This is important for demonstrating how and why the folk devil concept can be instrumental for advancing research in the social construction of 'evil'. Next, I illustrate how social scientists have, so far, treated moral panics and folk devils as two concepts as inseparably linked. This will lead into a discussion of the negative consequences of theoretically interlocking these concepts. Drawing on excerpts from news articles in the *Toronto Star*, the largest circulated newspaper in Canada, I illustrate how it is possible for folk devil labeling, herein referred to as *folk devilling*, to occur without moral panics (thestar.com). I conclude by considering how a distinct, folk devil research program can advance studies in the sociology of 'evil'.

The Sociology of Evil

Contemporary social scientists have displayed a marked interest in the phenomenon of 'evil'. In particular, social psychologists have investigated the causes and consequences of evil behaviour, questioning how and why people act evil (Baumeister, 1998; Miller, 2004; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2012). For example, Zimbardo (2004) investigates how situational factors like "environmental anonymity" can encourage otherwise "good" people to take part in "evil" activities such as vandalism (p.33). Psychologists who study evil share an interest in how factors related to the individual, such as thoughts and personal desires, are causally linked to evil behaviour.

In contrast, far less interest has been paid to how people come to be *perceived* as 'evil'. The more limited social scientific research on evil-labeling has been conducted primarily by social psychologists

² For the purposes of this paper, the term *folk devil* will always be used to denote those who are *labelled* as folk devils. The term does not refer to any characteristics or behaviours of the person themselves, but rather it refers to how the person is perceived by others. This is consistent with Cohen's definition of folk devils (Cohen, 1972:10).

(Baumeister, 1997; Duntley and Buss, 2004; Levine, 1997). Baumeister (1997), for example, introduces the concept of the “myth of pure evil”, defining it to be a “composite of images” that represent the way members of society think about “evil” (p.74). He suggests that the following notions make up the core of the myth: 1. Evil is something “other” or “outside” of what we are; 2. Evil represents the “antithesis of order, peace, and stability”; 3. Evil involves the deliberate infliction of harm on other people; 4. Evil people derive pleasure from inflicting harm on others; 5. Evil people are characteristically egotistical; 6. Evil has been the same way since time immemorial; 7. The victim of evil is good; and 8. Evil people have trouble maintaining control over their emotions (Baumeister, 1997:73-74). Baumeister emphasizes that the myth of pure evil is a cognitive labeling tool that is subscribed to by those categorizing *other* people as evil.

Similarly, Levine (1997) proposes that there is widespread belief among members of society that the following traits or behaviours are characteristic of a “truly evil soul”: 1. Evil people deliberately plan and carry out plans to inflict harm on good people; and 2. Evil people experience and express no guilt or remorse for their actions (p.617). Baumeister (1997) and Levine’s (1997) social psychological research is insightful because indicates how members of Western society mentally represent ‘evil’ to themselves.

In comparison, sociologists have been largely silent on questions of ‘evil’. Wolff (1969) laments that sociologists have neglected the important question of ‘What is evil?’ He appeals to sociologists to develop of a research program in the “sociology of evil”, and he proposes that sociological insight can be gained from uncovering the “social sources” of “conceptions of evil”, as well as learning more about the “social” and “political” consequences of being labeled “evil”.

Alexander (2003) argues that, for the most part, social scientists have, “...been unsuccessful in addressing evil” (p.109). He explains that “evil” is relegated to the margins of social science and treated as a ‘residual category’ of human behaviour (Alexander, 2003:109). Societal values are understood to represent “orientations to the good”, whereas “deviations” from these orientations are considered to be “evil” (Alexander, 2003:109). Alexander (2003) proposes that a more elaborate model of ‘social good and evil’ that does not just treat “evil” as a residual category of social activity is needed.

Whilst social scientists have questioned what psychological processes and motivations explain the cognitive construction of ‘evil’, sociological research into the *social* construction of ‘evil’ has been largely neglected. Although sociologists have devoted attention to understanding the social construction of various forms of negative labels such as ‘deviant’, ‘criminal’, ‘addict’, and ‘mentally ill’, they have, for the most part, shied away from studying ‘evil’ as a social construct. Consequently, we know very little about how the social construction of ‘evil’ compares and contrasts to the social construction of other forms of ‘deviance’ such as criminality, mental illness, addiction, or juvenile delinquency. As mentioned above, folk devils have come to be conceptualized as the embodiment of ‘evil’ in the sociological and criminological literature. However, due to the poverty of research into the folk devil model, its’ potential utility for the sociology of evil has yet to be fully realized. Folk devils have been treated as just one of many variables in the moral panic model, even though both of these concepts emerged from two separate theoretical canons.

The Origins of Cohen’s (1972) Moral Panic and Folk Devil Concepts

When tracing folk devils and moral panics back to their theoretical origins, it becomes clear that these two concepts refer to two separate phenomena. Cohen’s (1972) moral panic concept can be directly linked to the literature on *claims making*, whereas his folk devil concept can be connected to research on *labeling*.

Moral Panics and Claims-Making

During the “skeptical revolution” in criminology (see Cohen, 1972:12) scholars extended the symbolic interactionist process of situation-defining to their studies of crime and deviance (see Blumer, 1969 and Mead, 1934). They noted that certain members of society advocate for changes in the law that will advance their own subjective moral codes. Becker (1963) discusses the activities of the *moral*

entrepreneur, for whom “...the existing rules do not satisfy him because there is some evil which profoundly disturbs him”. (pp.147-148). It is evident that Cohen (1972) concurs with Becker’s (1963) understanding of moral entrepreneurship since he defines moral panics as occurrences where events, individuals and groups become defined as threats to societal values and interests (Cohen, 1972).

Similarly, Gusfield (1967) investigates a form of moral entrepreneurship which he refers to as a *symbolic crusade* (p.177). He looks specifically at how legislators can enact laws that publicly confirm their “social ideals and norms”. The activities of these lawmakers take on symbolic value as they elevate the moral values of one group while downgrading the moral codes of another. Gusfield’s (1967) influence on moral panic theory is most clearly seen in Cohen’s (1972) discussion and explanation of how politicians engage in the “manning of moral barricades” (p.9). For Cohen (1972), society’s protection of “moral barricades” ensures that those laws created to uphold agreed upon ‘ideals’ and ‘norms’ are maintained.

Cohen (1972) notes that, during a moral panic, the seriousness of the perceived threat of a situation is out of proportion with the reality of the threat. Before this, however, Wilkins also wrote about how events become distorted by society members. Wilkins (1965) notes that societal concern over juvenile delinquency arises from society member’s second-hand knowledge about juvenile delinquency (p.136). Fear of crime is the result of knowledge received from various social agencies including the news media (Wilkins, 1965:136-137). He suggests that certain groups may be exaggerating the threat of social problems in order to promote their own “value systems” (Wilkins, 1965:138-140). This observation, of course, is further elaborated by Cohen (1972) in his discussion of media exaggeration and distortion. Although it is evident that Cohen’s (1972) moral panic concept is firmly rooted within the claims-making literature, his folk devil concept originates from a related, but distinct theoretical tradition.

Folk devils and labeling theory

Whereas moral panics can be linked to claims making research, folk devils are connected to theories of labeling and stigmatization. Cohen’s (1972) folk devil can be seen as an example of a *secondary deviant*³. Lemert (1951) proposes that “deviant” acts be classified as *primary deviance* when they are understood to be the product of a “socially acceptable role” (p.75). In contrast, he classifies as *secondary deviance* those acts that are repetitive, highly visible, and that invoke a strong, negative societal reaction (Lemert, 1951:76).

Klapp (1962) presents an analysis of deviance that had important bearing on Cohen’s development of the folk devil. He takes to task distinguishing between *villains* and *pure villains* (Klapp, 1962:50). While he explains that villains can sometimes be confused with heroes if they exhibit qualities of both typical villains and heroes, for Klapp (1962), “A pure villain lacks redeeming traits that confuse him with a hero” (p.50). Cohen’s model was influenced by Klapp (1962) in the sense that, like pure villains, folk devils are void of *any* positive or redeeming qualities⁴.

What can be gleaned from this brief scholarly review is that Cohen’s (1962) folk devil and moral panic models came out of two interrelated, but nevertheless, distinct strands of symbolic interactionist theory. Yet, since the publication of Cohen’s (1962) book, the vast majority of sociologists and criminologists have treated folk devils as only one sub-unit in the moral panic concept.

Why Folk Devils Are Ignored: The Folk Devil-Moral Panic Dialectic

Folk devils and moral panics have both been conceptually linked by a number of scholars. Recall that Cohen (1972) defines moral panics as instances in which individuals or groups come to be labeled as a

³To be clear, I am not suggesting that folk devils are *synonymous* with secondary deviance (referring to the label and not the person), but rather that folk devils are a distinct *type* of secondary deviant

⁴To be clear, however, I am not suggesting that folk devils are exactly the same as pure villains. Unlike folk devils, pure villains are not intended to be representative of ‘evil’.

threat to societal values. Those who become labeled as threats to societal interests, he submits, are folk devils. Furthermore, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) understand folk devils to be essential to moral panics (pp.33-38). The authors claim that, in order for a moral panic to exist, all five of the following criteria must be satisfied: 1. There must be an increased level of *concern* over the actions of a group of people; 2. There must be a higher level of *hostility* directed toward this group of people; 3. There must be a general *consensus* within society that this group poses a legitimate and serious threat; 4. The perceived threat of this group must be *disproportionately* higher than it actually is; and 5. Societal reaction to this group must be *volatile*, meaning that it arises suddenly and disappears just as quickly⁵ (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994:33-38). The authors posit that people become folk-devilled when a higher level of hostility is directed toward them compared to those who pose an equal, if not greater, threat (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, pp.33-38). Therefore, like Cohen (1972), Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) see folk devils as the outcome of moral panics.

It is useful to conceive of this moral panic-folk devil connection as dialectical. Dialectical theorization involves treating two concepts or principles as reciprocally related to one another (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004). Indeed, dialectical logic can be an invaluable tool for better understanding how and why moral panics and folk devils are related to each other. Evidence clearly shows that in order for a moral panic to take place there must be a folk devil. In this respect, moral panics and folk devils are dialectically related. However, evidence also suggests that there does not necessarily need to be a moral panic in order for folk devils to exist. Thus, the two concepts ought to be read as both related *and* separate. However, I argue that treating moral panics and folk devils as dialectically related can lead to the false conclusion that folk devils and moral panics are *always* interconnected. Indeed, in her 2011 study of Muslim boys in England, *The New Folk Devils: Muslim Boys and Education in England*, Shain asserts that; “The folk devil concept *needs* to be read in interaction with the notion of moral panic” [emphasis added] (p.xi). Put another way, folk devils and moral panics can never be investigated as separate phenomenon. This interlocking of theoretical concepts can result in several negative consequences, to which I now turn.

Consequences of the folk devil-moral panic dialectic

Conceptualizing folk devils and moral panics as dialectically related to each other has led to several negative consequences. These include the following: 1. Folk devils are poorly defined; 2. Folk devils are under-theorized and under-examined; 3. Folk devils are confused with other types of ‘deviants’⁶; and 4. Folk devil concepts are judged based on the success of moral panic models. To begin, the greater focus on moral panics has resulted in the folk devil concept remaining poorly defined. In comparison to folk devils, moral panics have been clearly and comprehensively explicated in the sociological literature. This is evidenced by Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s (1994) conceptual scheme in which they lay out five specific criteria (consensus; hostility; disproportionality; concern; and volatility) that can be used to identify and distinguish moral panics from actual, legitimate concerns. As well, Cohen (1972) devotes much of his text to establishing the hallmark features of moral panics. For example, he devotes an entire chapter to discussing three social processes that occur during a moral panic: exaggeration and distortion; prediction; and symbolization (Ch. 2: pp.27-44). *Distortion* involves societal exaggeration of the seriousness of events (Cohen, 1972:31). *Prediction* involves the assumption that what has happened in the past will inevitably happen again (Cohen, 1972:38). *Symbolization* entails the stereotyping of individuals (Cohen, 1972:40). I make note of this in order to illustrate that Cohen (1972) dedicates a significant portion of his book to clearly outlining the characteristic features of a moral panic.

I argue that, in contrast to moral panic explanations, we have only short and vague definitions to work with for making sense of folk devils. For example, Cohen (1972), who first introduced the folk

⁵For the purposes of this paper, I will draw primarily on *this* conceptual scheme (as well as Cohen’s explanation of moral panics) in order to question whether folk devils exist outside of moral panics.

⁶ For the purposes of this paper, ‘deviants’, like folk devils, refer to those *labelled as* deviant.

devils, provides surprisingly little direction on how to fully understand his concept. He states that folk devils are social types that serve as visible reminders of what we should not be; however, he does not unpack this definition any further. Furthermore, he is not clear on what exactly he means by the phrase "...what we should not be".

Hall and colleagues' (1978) definition of folk devils is similarly vague and unfocused. Consider some of the phrases he uses to define the folk devil: "the alternative to all we know"; "*the negation*"; "the profligate figure by whom Virtue is constantly tempted". When Hall and colleagues claim that the folk devil is the reverse image of "all we know", one must question what, exactly, the authors mean by "all that we know"? Is it possible for a social construct to oppose *everything* known to *every* human being? Thus, Hall and colleagues' (1978) definition fails to bring us closer to a more concrete understanding of what, exactly, a folk devil label is?

Lastly, Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) definition of the folk devil as an "evil party" is more clear and concise than the definitions discussed above. They distinguish folk devils from other social types by classifying them as "evil". However, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) fail to clearly define what 'evil' is. Without a clear definition 'evil', or more importantly, what members of society believe is 'evil', it is difficult to explain exactly *what* or *who* a folk devil is. In consequence, scholars do not have any concrete guidelines to use when empirically defining, assessing, comparing and/or distinguishing folk devils from other 'deviant' social types.

Second, Cohen's the folk devil concept has been under-conceptualized since its' theoretical development has been almost entirely limited to studies of moral panic. Folk devils are rarely of interest to criminologists or sociologists unless they pertain directly to moral panics. Indeed, after conducting an online search of peer-reviewed journal articles using the University of Toronto's library database, I was able to find only two studies in which the authors invoked the folk devil concept without *also* discussing moral panics⁷. The prevailing opinion of scholars seems to be that folk devils are *only* important during times of moral panic.

For example, Levi (2009) devotes significant attention to folk devils in his study of moral panics and white collar crime. He explains that, although businesspersons and corporations are generally held in high esteem, white-collar criminals do, at times, become labeled as folk devils (Levi, 2009). He explains that the criminalizing of high status white collar offenders can be "cathartic" for since it involves people demonizing others who are similar to themselves (for example, hardworking, successful, entrepreneurial), in order to re-assert "moral boundaries of the self" (Levi, 2009:65). However, Levi's (2009) discussion of corporate folk devils is part of a larger effort to apply the moral panic concept to corporate crime. He suggests that, although people are less likely to fear white collar crime in the same way that they would street crime, public reactions to crimes such as identity fraud and investment fraud have, at times, exploded into moral panics (Levi, 2009). He argues that, when white collar crime becomes personified by certain individuals who are well known in society, a media outcry and panic can ensue (Levi, 2009:50). This is particularly the case if the crimes appear to represent a society that is changing and becoming "less moral" (Levi, 2009:50).

Similarly, Adjzenstadt (2009) highlights how single mothers on welfare became targeted as folk devils during the country's transition into a "market-oriented mode of government" (p.68). The government painted single mothers out to be "lazy" and "unproductive", and accused them of abusing the welfare system (Adjzenstadt, 2009:78). Once again, however, the title of her paper, "Moral panics and neo-liberalism", makes it abundantly clear that the author's main intention is to demonstrate that the Israeli government's actions constituted a moral panic (Adjzenstadt, 2009:68). Adjzenstadt (2009) argues that the Israeli government launched a moral panic by depicting single mothers as a threat to the currently existing economic, social and political structure of their country. These two studies represent contemporary examples of how folk devils have been dealt with in criminology and sociology. The most

⁷ For this library search, I retrieved *all* peer-reviewed articles that contain the words 'folk devils' and/or 'folk devil' but that do *not* contain the words 'moral panic' or 'moral panics'. This search was grounded in the assumption that any studies invoking the moral panic concept would have to, at some point, make explicit reference to the term 'moral panic'.

contemporary literature suggests that folk devils are only important insofar as they can be used to either prove or disprove the existence of moral panics.

The fact that folk devils have been left relatively un-theorized has led to a third negative consequence; namely that folk devils often become confused with other 'deviants'. For example, in Hier's (2011) recent attempt at "tightening the focus" of moral panics, he refers to folk devils as those individuals who are "unable" or "unwilling" to exercise "individual autonomous action" (p.539). However, this explanation conflates folk devils with 'risk subjects', or those who pose a danger to society if they are left to manage their own affairs unsupervised (Hannah-Moffat, 2004).

Consider also McRobbie and Thornton (1995), who consider folk devils to be members of marginal groups who are, today, more empowered in contemporary society than they were at the time Cohen (1972) was researching the Mods and Rockers affairs. Here, however, folk devils become synonymous with marginalized persons. McRobbie and Thornton (1995:566) explain that folk devils "can and do fight back" against media processes of demonization. Beyond this, however, the authors provide little direction on how to understand or conceptualize folk devils.

The consequence of this confusion of concepts is that the folk devil loses its intended meaning and is stripped of its most important features. The folk devil no longer represents the "personification of *evil*". Recall from Baumeister (1997) and Levine (1997) that, in Western society, 'evil' is understood to denote a very specific set of human characteristics and behaviours, including: egotism; remorselessness; and a desire to harm others. These unique qualities are believed to be what separates 'evil' people from non-'evil' people. By this logic, folk devils, who are the personification of 'evil', must also be distinguishable from others on account of these features and qualities.

McRobbie and Thornton (1995) and Hier (2011) define folk devils in a way that highlights their 'deviant' qualities but ignores their 'evil' characteristics. "Risk subjects" and the socially marginalized are two categories of people who are considered 'deviant'. However, I suggest that only a portion of these 'deviants' will go on to being labeled as 'evil', since it is a label that is reserved for those believed to be the most malicious of wrongdoers. By defining folk devils as 'deviants', we conflate these two distinct concepts, and lose sight of the important quality of 'evil'.

Lastly, in recent decades the folk devil concept has been reformulated and reformatted by a number of scholars. However, it is evident that these revisions have been made primarily with the goal of furthering moral panic theories. This is problematic since it means that, in each case, the success of a revised folk devil concept is tied to, and affected by, the success of a revised moral panic concept.

For example, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) take issue with Cohen's (1972) notion of society as a unified and consistent, monolithic whole. They suggest that society is, instead, heterogeneous and multi-vocal. They believe that moral panics often afflict only certain groups of people, rather than an entire society. Also, recall that McRobbie and Thornton (1995) provide a reformulated explanation of folk devils- individuals who have the ability to defend themselves and fight back against those trying to stigmatize them. However, a careful reading of the authors' argument reveals that their re-theorization of the folk devil is directly contingent upon their reformatted moral panic concept. They explain that folk devils can fight back through the use of media sources that are sympathetic to their circumstances. This can only happen in a heterogeneous society where not every journalist, newspaper, and magazine is gripped by moral panic. The implication of this is that McRobbie and Thornton's (1995) folk devil concept cannot be further conceptualized without first accepting the central tenets of their moral panic concept.

As well, Hier (2011) considers folk devils to be "irresponsible others", or those "unable" or "unwilling" to exercise authority (p.528). However, once again, his re-conceptualization of folk devils is dependent on his definition of moral panics as volatile crises in moral regulation. Hier understands moral panics to be dialectically related to long-term everyday moral regulation. He suggests that, for the majority of the time, fears and anxieties surrounding future potential risk serve to motivate people into engaging in personal risk management techniques (Hier, 2011). These strategies involve surveying and managing "irresponsible others" (Hier, 2011). He argues that, when "responsibilization" strategies fail, routine discourses of individual risk management become transformed into "collective representations of

harm” (Hier, 2011). These collective representations take the form of a defensive reaction against what is perceived to be an immediate threat- hence, a moral panic (Hier, 2011). Therefore, for Hier, moral panics represent an inverted form of everyday moral regulation against risky persons. Those risky persons who are targeted for risk management become labeled folk devils during moral panics. What this means, however, is that in order to adopt Hier’s (2011) definition of folk devils, we must also accept his conceptualization of moral panics.

In brief, the consequence of intermixing folk devils with moral panics is that: the importance of the folk devil is downplayed; folk devils are typically confused with other ‘deviants’; folk devils are not yet adequately defined; and the success of folk devil concepts are reliant on the success of moral panic concepts. Because sociologists and criminologists have come to understand folk devils as restricted to moral panics and indistinguishable from other ‘deviants’, scholars have overlooked the potentially significant contributions that a full-fledged folk devil research program can make to sociology, and in particular, the sociology of ‘evil’. In order to resolve this dilemma, I argue that the folk devil concept must be theoretically separated from the moral panic concept. I propose that this can be best accomplished by paying closer attention to situations where folk deviling occurs independently from moral panics.

Investigating Folk Devils *Without* Moral Panics

Moral panic scholars such as Cohen (1972), Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), and Hall and colleagues (1978) all stress that a necessary pre- requisite for a moral panic is a folk devil. They agree that you cannot have moral panic without a folk devil. However, a question that has not yet been posed is whether you can have a folk devil *without* a moral panic. I will devote the rest of this paper to highlighting newspaper content which suggests that folk devils and moral panics are independent and separate phenomena. I will present some examples of situations where folk deviling has occurred without a moral panic, using *Toronto Star* newspaper articles as empirical data. I draw on five newspaper articles that I *deliberately* selected for the purposes of illustrating circumstances under which folk devil labeling can occur outside of the context of moral panics. I chose to invoke a *purposive sampling strategy*, which involves the non-random selection of cases (Altheide, 1996). I intentionally searched for articles in which either the author, or someone quoted in the article, used labels that denote ‘evil’ (such as ‘evil’, ‘wicked’, or ‘devil’) to describe a certain individual or group of people. The aim of this analysis was not to study the prevalence or incidence of folk devilling, but rather to illustrate how folk devilling *can* occur outside of moral panics. Purposive sampling was deemed sufficient for this investigation (as opposed to random sampling) since it was not necessary to generate a probability sample representative of the overall population of newspaper articles. We instead want to carry out an in-depth study of several instances of this unique social process.

To begin, violent murderers are sometimes referred to as ‘evil’, or compared to the devil. In 2010, for example, Shivonne Clarke, a Toronto woman whose husband, Jahmeel Spence, was shot to death, told the *Star* that, “There are just *evil* people out there that take away good people [emphasis added]” (Rush, 2011:A18). One year later, when an individual was arrested for Spence’s murder (along with the murder of four other people), Detective Sergeant Hank Idsinga explained to the *Star* that, “The callousness of the murders was really shocking...If these allegations are proven in court, he is an *evil* man. To rationalize why he did some of the things he did, I’m at a loss... I really am [emphasis added]” (Rush and Aulakh, 2011:A1).

In both cases, Spence’s alleged killer was denoted as a folk devil with the word ‘evil’. Although societal reaction to the murder may have met a number of important moral panic criteria (for example, hostility, volatility, and concern), it did not appear to satisfy the criterion of either disproportionality or consensus. There are no indications that these murders elicited a significantly disproportionate amount of news publicity in the *Star*. When glancing at the coverage of murders in Toronto in 2010, up to this date, eight articles have been written about Spence’s murder, whereas five articles have been written about the murder of Tyrone Bracken on November 20th; five articles were written about the murder of Sealand

White on October 9th; five articles have been written about the murder of Jermaine Derby on October 9th; and five articles were written about the jail murder of Kevon Phillip on January 2nd (*Star*, 2010).

Hence, although more articles were written about Spence than any of the other murder victims, the difference is small, and hence it is very difficult to conclude that this difference symbolizes any form of disproportionate reaction that constitutes moral panic. Furthermore, two of Spence's articles covered several homicide victims *including* Spence, and another article was written about the number of homicides in Toronto that year, not focusing solely on Spence. In each of these three articles, roughly equal attention was paid to *all* of the victims. There was no other evidence of exaggeration and/or distortion in *any* news article written about Spence from either the *Star*. Since Cohen (1972) argues that exaggerated and/or distorted news reportage is a necessary condition for moral panics; this suggests that a moral panic did not develop from Spence's death. Regardless however, the murderer was folk-devilled; hence folk-deviling can occur separately from moral panics.

Second, the *Star* provides illustration of incidents where individuals are folk-devilled, even when there is no evidence of society-wide *consensus* surrounding the use of the label. For example, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper was quoted by the *Star* as claiming that the federal New Democratic Party (NDP) had an "agenda" to "disintegrate our society", and that; "The NDP (federal New Democratic Party) is the kind of proof that the *devil* lives and interferes with the affairs of men" (Harper, 2011:A8)⁸. Harper (2011:A8) was referring, specifically, to a Halifax NDP member of parliament who travelled to Washington, DC in to voice their opposition to Alberta petroleum being shipped to the US via the Keystone XL Pipeline. By suggesting that the devil was involved in the NDP's affairs, the prime minister had folk-devilled the NDP party.

Whilst there is evidence to suggest that Mr. Harper's reaction to the NDP meeting was, indeed, hostile and volatile, the Washington meeting does not appear to have generated a moral panic. To date, only two articles have been published by the *Star* referring to the meeting. Only one has been written by the *Globe and Mail*, and no articles have been published by the *National Post* (Canada's two other national newspapers) (Chase, Wingrove and Tait, 2011:A5; Harper, 2011:A8; Whittington, 2011:A9). Also, neither of these articles make any reference to a significantly large group of people who believe that what the NDP had done was wrong and dangerous. Hence, this event does not appear to have garnered a disproportionately large amount of media attention compared to other events. Although we have proof that one person, Mr. Harper, folk devilled the NDP, there is no evidence of widespread consensus over his concern regarding the NDPs actions.

Social psychological research confirms that it is typical for only *one* person to perceive someone else as being 'evil'. Baumeister (1997:72) argues that part of the 'evil' image is the notion of *intentional* harm. He reports that victims of harm are likely to perceive those who harmed them as having done so intentionally. This implies is that, oftentimes, only one person will label someone as 'evil', since nobody else will have been harmed in the same way. If an individual is folk devilled by only one person, then a moral panic has not taken place since there needs to be a consensus of opinion regarding the label from a significantly large group of people.

Lastly, there are numerous *Star* references to serial killers or political criminals that involve folk deviling. For instance, Debbie Mahaffy had the following to tell the press when she visited the house where her daughter, Leslie, was brutally raped and murdered by Paul Bernardo (and his accomplice Karla Hamolka) over fifteen years earlier; "The house is not evil; the ground on which it stands is not evil. But two *evil* people lived there. Two *evil* souls who have left this place, and who are now in another place, the place where they belong" (Anonymous, 2010:IN1). Another example comes from an article regarding Adolf Hitler⁹. Here, a writer for the *Star* comments that

⁸ The NDP is the official opposition federal political party in Canada.

⁹ Baumeister (1997) suggests that Hitler and the Nazis represented the most enduring image of 'evil' in the twentieth century (p.54).

I don't think the *Star* or the Canadian Jewish Congress would object to seeing [Adolf Hitler] quoted in an academic treatise about the Nazis. The objection in this case seems to lie in the fact that Hitler's remark was printed on its own, outside any context and without any explanation of why it was there. These men have been quoted because they are important political figures, as was Hitler. Most Canadians know that Hitler was *evil* and it is not necessary to preface every mention of the man with an elaborate denunciation [Monastyrskyj, 1994:C3].

Bernardo, Hamolka, and Hitler were all folk-devilled; however, it is not possible to connect these specific instances of labeling to moral panics. To be clear, I am not disputing whether or not moral panics *ever* did develop around these people and their crimes. But if they did occur, then these moral panics would have *erupted* and then fizzled out years before these two articles were written. The first article regarding the Nazis was written forty-nine years after the Second World War had ended. This particular article could not have represented any volatile fear or anxiety surrounding Hitler since the dictator had been dead for nearly forty years. Furthermore, the author in no way alluded to any fear or anxiety surrounding political crime or the Nazis. Instead, the author's concern surrounded whether or not it was appropriate to use one of Hitler's political quotations in an academic piece. In the case of Mahaffy's reference to Bernardo and Hamolka's "evil souls", it is fairly obvious that her statement is not grounded in any volatile fear or anxiety toward either Bernardo or Hamolka, nor serial murderers in general. The article was written fifteen years after the murder of Mahaffy's daughter. At this time, Bernardo was serving an indeterminate life sentence with no chance of parole. There was no discussion of Hamolka, suggesting that the folk devilling was not fuelled by any concern or fear that she might re-offend. Consequently, in these two instances folk devilling occurred separately from moral panics. In summary, there are numerous examples from the *Star* which demonstrate that folk deviling can take place outside of moral panics.

Future Directions: Toward a More Developed Sociology of Evil

The analysis presented above highlights how important it is for deviance scholars to treat folk devils as the focal point of their studies. An important first step that *must* be taken is the establishment of a more focused definition of folk devils. I have suggested that previous definitions allude to folk devils being inherently evil. Thus, I propose that 'evil' needs to be fully incorporated into any definition of folk devils and folk deviling. Without recognition of this characteristic, folk devils and folk deviling are at risk of being conflated with more general forms of deviance labeling that have already been extensively researched. As excerpts from the *Star* illustrate, identifying someone as 'evil' or connecting them to the devil is a qualitatively different exercise compared to denoting someone as 'criminal', 'delinquent', 'deviant', or 'sick'. The folk devil construct can be an invaluable tool for describing, analyzing and explaining the societal mechanisms that undergird instances when members of society are defined, specifically, as 'evil'.

Once a clear definition is crafted, a classificatory scheme for identifying and explaining folk devils must be developed. Researchers can use Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) moral panic criteria to carry out detailed analyses in order to conclude whether or not a moral panic has taken place. However, criteria such as these do not, as of yet, exist for studying folk devils. Therefore, there is greater potential for researchers to misidentify (or overlook) folk devils than there is for researchers to misidentify moral panics. Outlining exactly what this classification scheme should look like is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper. It will require extensive research into folk devils that is not tied to investigations of moral panics.

Research on folk devils will greatly enhance our understanding of the social construction of 'evil'. Currently, we do not know whether or not, and how, the consequences of being categorized as 'evil' may be similar or different from the consequences of being labeled any other type of 'deviant' such as criminal, delinquent, or mentally ill. Does this label carry the same weight as that of a 'criminal' label?

Does it carry the same consequences as that of a criminal record? Do the consequences vary based on who the labeler is (such as a police officer, a judge, the newspaper, the mayor, the prime minister)?

Furthermore, we do not know whether or not certain social characteristics of an individual (such as race, class, gender, age) can impact the likelihood of being typified as 'evil'. These are important empirical issues that need to be sorted out in the sociological study of evil. Collaboration among sociologists, criminologists and psychologists interested in evil needs to be stimulated in order to further develop 'evil' as a relevant social scientific concept.

I suggest that the model can be a valuable tool for empirically investigating social processes behind 'evil' labeling. The folk devil model has not yet been sufficiently developed in order for its utility in the sociology of evil to be fully realized. Because Cohen's (1972) two concepts have been interlocked in the criminological and sociological literature, the folk devil has been overshadowed by its status as a sub-component of the moral panic concept. Hence, in order for the folk devil to be of use to sociologists of evil, it must first be theoretically divorced from the moral panic model.

Deviance sociologists and criminologists can make significant contributions to the sociology of evil through a well-developed research program on folk devils. A strong research program on folk devils can lead to the development of a more "elaborate" model of "social good and evil", which is what Alexander (2003) believes is most lacking in the sociology of evil. At the same time, scholars of the sociology of evil can be of great service to folk devil academicians by providing important insight (from multiple different disciplinary perspectives) on how 'evil' is recognized and understood in society. Such information will be invaluable for social scientists attempting to refine and improve current definitions and explanations of folk devils. Accomplishing these necessary tasks will, without question, move us closer to a more developed theory of folk devils, and a more full-fledged sociology of evil.

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