

# Media Representations of the Causes of Crime

**Yvonne Jewkes** argues that awareness of the causes of crime are obscured by folkdevils and moral panics created by popular media.

**A**lthough causation is usually regarded as a complex process (that is, it may involve an elaborate nexus of influences and predisposing factors), as far as the popular media are concerned, the predominant causes of crime must be reduced and simplified in order to be made meaningful for the target audience. In the crudest terms, as far as the popular media are concerned, people commit crimes because 'they' are not like 'us'. This view which is apparent in various degrees of subtlety in all contemporary media, but might justifiably be said to be most clearly encapsulated in newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* illustrates the extent to which the media are one of the primary sites of social inclusion and exclusion. Thus, while media explanations for the commission of crimes are as multifarious as crimes themselves, the common link is that they tap into cultural fears of the 'other'.

For example, the current wave of political and media commotion about truancing (with parents facing on-the-spot fines if their children are caught bunking off school) is but one illustration of a contemporary culture of blame that is frequently directed at the 'monstrous offspring' of 'bad mothers', a construction that combines two contemporary folk devils and makes dual scapegoats of some of the least powerful members of society (Jewkes, 2004). No-one who lives in today's media-saturated society is immune to the circulation of ideas about 'self' and 'other'. As far as the British media are concerned, 'we' are the civilized, law-abiding 'moral majority', while 'they' are the dangerous classes, or their offspring, who must be identified, controlled and contained. At the other end of the criminal spectrum – the serious and/or unusual offences that really capture the public imagination and can paralyse communities with fear and shock: children killing children, paedophilic

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Notions of 'self' and 'other' have been permeating criminological discourse for some years now (Garland, 1996; Jefferson, 2002; Jewkes, 2004) and there are many examples of mediated 'outsiders' 'the threatening outcast, the fearsome stranger, the excluded and the embittered' (Garland, 1996) who provide the others against whom we measure ourselves. When negative qualities such as selfishness, irrationality, immorality and lesser reasoning are repeatedly attributed to single mothers, children and adolescents, those who lead 'unconventional' lifestyles, people from different ethnic backgrounds to our own (especially if they are seeking asylum on our shores) and people with mental illnesses, it is perhaps not surprising that it is these groups who are most consistently demonized by the media as these ascribed attributes become the lens through which we view the origins of crime.

Like all forms of causal analysis, the reduction of crime causation to notions of difference necessitates the control of alternative explanations. The construction of offenders as 'others' means that their 'outsider' status must be unequivocal and incontestable. At one end of the spectrum – that is, 'ordinary' or mundane crimes – this manifests itself in a marked intolerance towards anyone or anything that transgresses an essentially conservative agenda.

murders, cannibalistic orgies, internet-fuelled sex crimes – the popular media offer only one explanation, and that is they have been committed by individuals who are innately evil.

For all our 'postmodern' sophistication, then, the beginning of the 21st century finds the popular media still falling back on the positivist discourses of nineteenth-century criminology. The media's overwhelming tendency to denounce serious criminal acts as the work of a dangerous underclass, who do not share the morals of the majority, is evidence of our pre-modern responses to postmodern problems. Moreover, the 'evil monster' has emphatically superseded the less potent notion of the 'folkdevil' coined three decades ago by Stanley Cohen (1972). In the aftermath of several high profile cases that have taken place since the early 1990s (e.g. the murder of a toddler by two schoolboys from Liverpool in February 1993; the 1996 murders of Lin and Megan Russell by Michael Stone, who was classified as suffering from a Dangerous Severe Personality Disorder; the massacre of 16 children and their teacher in their Dunblane primary school by Thomas Hamilton in March 1996; the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11th 2001; Humberside Police's confusion over the Data Protection Act which allowed a known sex offender to get a job as a school caretaker in



Soham; the discovery that over 7,000 internet users in Britain had used their credit cards to buy access to abusive images of children from a single portal in Texas), notions of potential 'evil' have come to be applied indiscriminately to whole sections of society. In the oversimplified world-view of popular journalism, sufferers of mental illness can be portrayed as potential murderers; asylum seekers as potential terrorists; gun club members become potential spree killers; any stranger is a potential paedophile; and, most insidiously, children come to be seen as mini-monsters with no hope of rehabilitation (Greer, 2003).

When serious offences are committed, the evil nature of the act is projected onto the perpetrators and 'evil' comes to be seen, not as the element that sets the crime apart as an abnormal and isolated event, but as the common factor in all crimes that can be reported as components of a single moral panic (Franklin and Petley, 1996).

All mediated discourses are narrative devices but there are always counter-narratives, even if they are not represented by the media. Revenge is a common theme in the defences of many notorious killers and many claim that they acted out of a sense of grievance which they perceive as legitimating their crimes. America's most famous serial killer, Aileen Wuornos, explained her crimes (the murder of seven men) as acts of self-defence; Thomas Hamilton was said to have acted out of revenge against a community from which he felt persecuted and ostracised. Timothy McVeigh, who killed 168 people when he planted a bomb in a government building in Oklahoma, described it as a 'retaliatory strike, a counter attack' against the US government for their botched raid on a cult headquarters in Waco, Texas, and their treatment of Iraqis and their own troops through the use of chemicals. Numerous crimes so horrific that they result in life prison sentences, yet so mundane (because committed by men

against women and children) that they barely register a flicker of interest from the media, are committed by perpetrators who were either neglected in childhood or grew up in care and were the victims of sexual and physical abuse by adults in whom they should have been able to trust. Many might be said to have acted according to a prevailing culture which stresses individualism and glorifies violence as an appropriate and 'manly' response to frustration.

Even Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, while not mature enough at the time of their trial to offer a motive for killing James Bulger, inarguably had extenuating circumstances which included dysfunctional and, in the latter's case, violent, home lives.

Of course, all these defences can be read as cynical ploys by perpetrators or their supporters to shift their status from offender to victim.

But the crucial point is that, in downplaying their defences, the media demonstrate the profound discomfort and denial with which our culture views these counter narratives. Our collective ignorance about the causes of crime are perpetuated by a press who have taken to heart the words of former Prime Minister John Major, said in the context of the Bulger case, that we should seek to "condemn a little more and understand a little less".

Causes of crime are reduced to individual pathology and are constructed around the poorest and least powerful members of society because, without 'others', 'outsiders', 'strangers' and 'enemies within', the media would not succeed in constructing the moral consensus required to sell newspapers, gain audiences, and, most importantly, maintain a world at one with itself.

In effect, the causes of crime are indistinguishable from current policies of criminalization, both of which are uncritically communicated to the public at large by the popular media.

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