

Fear of Crime: The Impact of the Media

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This article focuses on the seemingly influential role of the media in provoking the fear of crime. By critically considering how the labelling of “others” is defined, interpreted, played out in the media, and constructed by “structural relations of power”, the stereotypical image of the “criminal other” will be suggested as central to revealing the media’s possible impact on the fear of crime. It is submitted that a shift in conventional media reporting, reflecting wider issues of criminalisation, including socialisation, sentencing and rehabilitation, may be one of the keys to truly deconstructing and tackling the fear of crime.

Introduction

Fear of crime is “a much more widely experienced phenomenon than victimisation” (Jewkes 2004: 144) and tackling the fear of crime has become a priority for criminal justice policy-makers (McLaughlin 2006: 165). According to Jewkes (2004: 224), fear of crime may be considered rational where there is some “tangible basis to the fear, such as, previous experience of victimisation”; or irrational, where the fear “is engendered by overblown and sensational media reporting of serious but untypical crimes”. This article will discuss the influential role of the media in pro-

voking the fear of crime; and then consider the strengths and limitations of the labelling perspective in enhancing our understanding of this relationship, using examples of atypical crimes. Although the media focus will, essentially, be on mass media broadcast and print, it must be recognised that “media are not only inseparable from contemporary social life; they are, for many, its defining characteristic” (Greer 2009: 177). Furthermore, according to Muncie (2006: 229), labelling “refers to the social processes through which certain individuals and groups classify and categorise the behaviour of others”. By critically examining how this behaviour of ‘others’ is defined, interpreted, played out in the media, and constructed by ‘structural relations of power’, the stereotypical image of the ‘criminal other’ will be suggested as central to revealing the media’s possible impact on the fear of crime.

Role of the Media in Provoking the Fear of Crime

Jefferson (2008: 118) notes that the fear of crime began to enter public discourse in the late 1960s. With as many as 7,000 crimes annually impinging on the individual in the UK through indirect media sources (Howitt 1998: 45) the effects of such “anticipated anxiety about crime” (O’Mahony and Quinn 1999, cited in Banks 2005) would appear to be devastating, with perhaps even more profound implications than actual victimisation. Potential consequences could range from isolation and depression to physical ill health (Stafford et al 2007: 2076). One such illustration is *Crimewatch UK* which “may amplify audience fears because it only reconstructs crimes that are unsolved” (Jewkes 2004: 161). In this regard, the media can shape our exposure and view of crime by moments of virtual witness that “brings us closer to the chaos and disorder that we fear” (Peelo 2006: 164). A striking illustration of the virtual witness effect is the video clip of James Bulger “raising his hand in the child’s universal – and commonplace – expectation of care” (ibid.:164) before being abducted and later killed by two ten-year-old boys.

The reporting of high profile crimes can sometimes provoke fear of a crime surge at a time when statistically incidents of that crime are on the decrease (Schlesinger and Tumbler 1994: 186) thereby promoting “asymmetry between the actual risk of victimisation and the fear of victimisation” (Ito 1993, cited in Howitt 1998). It would be far too simplistic to consider the impact of the media on the fear of crime without recognising that “[a]ctual risk of victimisation, previous experience of victimisation, environmental conditions, ethnicity and confidence in the police and the criminal justice system are among many of the factors interacting through complex processes to influence public anxiety about crime” (Jewkes 2004: 142). Additional factors may include lower educational achievement, loneliness and a perception that neighbours may be relatively untrustworthy (Howitt 1998: 49). There is also some evidence, albeit inconclusive, to support the view that reports of crime and punishment are received by an active audience (Carney 2010: 142). Whilst Gerbner and Gross (1976: 419) suggest because television overstates both the seriousness and risk of criminal victimisation, portraying the world as ‘mean and scary’, heavy viewing (more than four hours a day) is said to cultivate higher fear of crime. This can create a vicious cycle that reinforces anxieties held about the outside world, which may particularly be the case for those who regard TV as a ‘magic window’, such individuals regarding TV as an accurate representation of actual life (Potter 1986: 162).

Ditton et al (2004: 442) note that “of a total of 73 substantive attempts to establish a connection between media consumption and fear of crime, only 27 per cent of studies find a positive relationship, while 73 per cent do not”. Research focusing on the fear of crime in the respondent’s immediate neighbourhood tends to find no evidence that the media cultivate a fear of crime in the reader, listener or viewer (Heath and Petraitis 1987: 49). This is challenged by Thompson (1998: 51) who suggests that local media might be more pertinent to the enhancement of the fear

of crime. Despite some indications of an inconclusive link between the media and the fear of crime, perhaps unsurprising given the complexity of the contextualised variables requiring investigation and scrutiny, such a correlation may have a strong intuitive appeal (Ditton et al 2004: 442). Furthermore, the media seem to represent and portray crime as a result of individual pathology and they do not often relate it with broader socioeconomic problems and structural issues (Markantonatou 2005:139). Consequently, the remainder of this paper will shift away from the positivist focus on the individual ‘criminal’ to critically consider the labelling perspective, including social interactionism.

Strengths and Limitations of the Labelling Perspective

According to Becker (1963: 9), “social groups create deviance by making the rules whose in-fraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders”. This challenges the often held media assumption that crime and deviance are the products of either a ‘sick individual’ or a ‘sick society’. Becker’s ‘hierarchy of credibility’, recognising the influence and power of the agents of social control, claims such agents are more likely to be believed than the deviants (Cohen 2002: 33). For instance, the reconstruction of events following the Hillsborough disaster by police at the highest level, realigned blame to the victims (Scraton 2007: 78), with media representations framing supporters’ behaviour using a hooligan perspective. The demonisation of the survivors and the dead was evident in the purposefully considered allegations in *The Sun* (ibid.: 79). Media reporting of crime reflects this power differential, promoting the fear of crime, mobilising public reaction and increasing the pressure on police, courts and politicians to remove the threat. Furthermore, the labelling of individuals may result in certain groups or individuals being outside cognitive maps of the media in reporting crime, encouraging a more lenient line on the punishment of such crimes as tax evasion, compared to a harder line on welfare fraud, reflecting a pervasive bias in the labelling of criminals

(Jewkes 2004: 20). Hence, a labelling perspective challenges definitions of crime, criminal, and the legal control of crime, which is crucial to any deconstruction of the fear of crime.

Cohen (1980) used the term ‘moral panic’ to characterise the reactions of the media, the public, and agents of social control to youth disturbances (cited in Killingbeck 2001: 187). According to Sumner (1994: 264), Cohen employed a deviancy amplification model to highlight how deviants were “‘identified, symbolized, policed, dramatized and blown up with serious threats to life and limb... by the agencies of the “control culture””. Such sensationalist reporting of crime by the media often involves personalised story lines that can lead to a ‘signification spiral’ (Thomson 1998: 29), further creating and fuelling moral panics. For instance, the personalisation and demonisation of Thomas Hamilton, who was presented by the media as a ‘monster’ following the Dunblane shootings, with persistent assumptions made about his sexuality and ‘unhealthy interest’ in young boys (Scraton, 2007). The media focused on the individual pathology of the ‘criminal’ Hamilton, with an omission of causal factors or evidence of his articulate and disciplined character.

According to Sumner (1994: 232), Becker’s labelling theory constituted a break with legalism and “‘represented a rejection of the view that law expressed popular morality and was enforced fairly and equally”. A striking illustration of such was the findings of the Macpherson Report, following the murder of Stephen Lawrence, which found the Metropolitan Police Service to be institutionally racist. Cottle (2005:68) notes how the “‘mediatised Macpherson inquiry unleashed an avalanche of cultural reflection and... commitments to change”. Lawrence became a powerful mediatised moral panic, all the more potent and unnerving for the powerful definers and public alike, because the victim did not fit the stereotypical label of what a black youngster featuring in headline news about crime should be. McLaughlin (2008: 152) suggests this was the

first time that the stereotypical image of a young black male as a potential ‘mugger’ was ruptured. The critical role played by the Daily Mail, “heightened the public profile of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence and armed the Lawrence family with the moral authority and political clout to persuade the New Labour government that it was politically safe to establish a judicial enquiry” (McLaughlin 2005: 274).

In addition to labelling individuals or groups as deviant, crimes themselves can be labelled, creating a deeper emotive response from society. Until very recently there was no crime of “stalking” but this label was frequently used by the media, with such a construction and image likely to fuel the public’s fear of crime. Such ideological representations of crime are often internalised unknowingly, shaping one’s interpretation of the fear and crime, and creating a hegemonic crisis, with the potential for perceived social disintegration. When crime involves children, the deviant behaviour automatically crosses a higher threshold of victimisation than would have been possible if adults alone had been involved (Jenkins 1992, cited in Jewkes 2004). The exceptional case of James Bulger, which crystallised fears about the nature of childhood and public safety (Norris and Armstrong 1999: 37):

‘proved a watershed in terms of criminal justice and crime prevention. The 10-year-olds were tried in adult court and the case was the impetus for a massive expansion of CCTV equipment in public spaces throughout the country’ (Jewkes 2004: 224).

In contrast, the abduction and murder of two-year-old Sarona Joseph, by a twelve-year-old, did not create the suggestion of widespread malaise and there was little public reaction because the media did not employ the same moralising discourse (Thompson 1998: 96). Furthermore, the Norwegian case of Silje Redergard was constructed as a “tragic one off,

requiring expert intervention to facilitate the speedy reintegration of the boys responsible” (Green 2008: 197), illustrating a more rehabilitative approach to crime. The public’s fear of crime, lack of confidence in the criminal justice system and the role played by the UK press undoubtedly played a part in conceptualising the Bulger case using a ‘criminal justice’ frame rather than a ‘child welfare’ frame (ibid.: 202). Conversely, labelling theorists would suggest avoidance of an official reaction to crime may significantly reduce offending (Muncie 2006: 230). According to Cohen (1985: 169) 20 years of labelling theory has attempted to demonstrate that many forms of intervention in response to crime are iatrogenic and make things worse through amplification, self-fulfilling prophecies and secondary deviance, whereby “life and identity are organised around the facts of deviance” (Lemert 1967: 41).

In terms of limitations, Muncie (2006: 230) questions whether labelling theory explains why some behaviours come to be defined in a historical and political context as deviant, whilst others do not. It would also appear that labelling theorists have tended to focus on minor delinquency and ‘victimless’ offences rather than serious crime (Garland 2008: 20). This would seem contrary to the media’s tendency to transform the atypical into the stereotypical. According to Wilson et al (2010: 153) the case of Trevor Joseph Hardy had all the hallmarks of creating a moral panic, by labelling, demonising and sensationalising this exceptional case because it ‘ticked all the boxes’ to be a major story. Between 1974 and 1976, Hardy murdered three young women in Manchester, England, and is now one of Britain’s longest serving prisoners (ibid.: 153). The fact it did not may suggest ‘moral panics’ are only ‘tactically exploited’ when the need arises (Hall 1978: 144). Labelling theory may also ignore the “conscious rebellion or rejection” by some labelled offenders and alternatively, “new recruits might search for and positively try to exemplify the values and images portrayed in the stereotypes” (Cohen 2002: 138). This may lead to different levels of deviance within specific subcultures

and idiocultures that only the most determined investigative journalist, if so motivated, may expose.

Conclusion

The media is a dynamic social institution (Silverblatt 2004: 39) whose effect on the fear of crime will remain difficult to fully demonstrate. Similarly, changes to the definitions of crime, deviance and fear will also evolve in response to political manoeuvrings and the agendas of those with a vested interest in the criminal justice system. This further reinforces what is perhaps the key limitation of a labelling perspective highlighted by Scraton (2007: 220), the “tendency to depict social interactionism as divorced from structural relations of power”. This is where the media’s relationship with powerful definers, having legitimate authority to adopt and exercise ever more punitive measures to combat crime, requires more scrutiny. Tackling the fear of crime remains a priority for justice policy-makers, and yet the information they provide to the media is rich in ‘just deserts’ ideology, thereby raising the public’s expectation and pressure for a solution to the ‘problem’. This is not to undermine the invaluable role investigative journalism has played in media campaigns to reduce crime and uncover the need for reform. Indeed, it can be argued that “crime threatens our culture and ways of living, so the media ought to encourage the fear of crime” (Howitt 1993: 45). Nonetheless, it is the traditional media and cultural practices, with the focus on the actions of the so labelled ‘criminal other’, which may create a vicious cycle in the public’s fear of crime. A shift in conventional media reporting reflecting wider issues of criminalisation, including socialisation, sentencing and rehabilitation, may be one of the keys to truly deconstructing and tackling the fear of crime.

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