Advocacy Research and Social Policy: Action for Children and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children as case studies

Abstract

Much social policy research today is commissioned, published and publicised by organisations with direct involvement in that particular aspect of policy. Whilst much good can result from such 'advocacy research', at times the tactics employed by some groups have been criticised for exaggerated claims-making and sensationalist reporting as they attempt to get their particular issue into the political and public domain and also generate more government funding and/or increase public donations.

In this paper I wish to look at some of the tactics utilised by advocacy groups in order to establish the legitimacy of their particular concern. I focus on material published by Action for Children (AFC) and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) between 2010 and 2012 in relation to child maltreatment, critically analysing them from a social constructionist standpoint and drawing on aspects of moral panic theory, such as signification spiral and category conflation to add to the critical literature around moral panics, moral entrepreneurs and advocacy research. The paper concludes by warning of the dangers for both social policy and related practice that can arise from uncritically accepting the claims of contemporary moral entrepreneurs.

<u>Key words:</u> Moral Panic, Advocacy Research, Children, Risk

Introduction

Much social policy research today is commissioned, published and publicised by organisations with direct involvement in that particular aspect of policy; for example the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) around children, Age UK around older people, MIND on issues to do with mental health, and so on. Such 'advocacy research', is, in and of itself, not a cause for concern. On the contrary, having a particular interest or passion for an issue can spur people on to highlight social problems and recommend and/or demand interventions in order to alleviate them. Often, such campaign groups identify gaps in knowledge and commission research that improves our understanding of areas of social concern, which, in turn, can help make people's lives healthier, safer and more rewarding. Even some of advocacy research's most vocal critics (e.g. Gilbert, 1997) acknowledge that it has, at times, helped to raise awareness of hitherto hidden problems and influence social policy in highly progressive ways. An early example of this would be Charles Booth's survey of poverty in London in the 1880s; as such it has a long and often highly noble tradition.

Whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with passionately pursuing an issue that you feel requires attention and rectification, there can be a tendency for passion to override a more sober reading of the acquired data. There is therefore a need 'to be cautious and modest in making empirical claims and passionate and personal in expressing policy views' (Gilbert, 1997, p.101). For Gilbert, such 'unbiased measurement with

committed expression of concern... reflected a standard of advocacy research at its best'. However, he goes on to argue that such a standard has 'steadily eroded since the 1960s' (ibid. p.103), and that, in many cases, the research carried out by such groups betrays a distinct lack of both caution and modesty.

One reason for this is that in order to get their particular concern up the political agenda, and in the process generate more income, it has been argued that many organisations and campaign groups can inflate the extent of their particular issue of social concern (Gilbert, 1997). For Gilbert, one consequence of this can be that instead of improving knowledge, they can distort our understanding of the real scale of social problems and adversely affect social policy, for example by public funds and services being allocated disproportionately. The current economic crisis was always likely to exacerbate this situation. As the cuts bite many groups are struggling to carry on with much reduced budgets, and therefore if they are to survive they need to argue their case as persuasively as possible. In hard times, the harsh reality is that good marketing can make the difference between survival and oblivion for such groups. For example, although the NSPCC's annual report for 2011/12 shows an income of £135.7 million (90% of which comes from public donations) this represents a reduction of 8.7% on the previous year's income (NSPCC, 2012i). It is not only its public donations that have reduced but those from central and local government also, with the yearly accounts showing that the funding it receives for its 'charitable activities' from government, local authorities and professional groups (for the

provision of such things as service level agreements and training) fell from £23.2 million in the period 2009/2010 to £17.1 million in 2010/11 and to £11.1 million for 2011/12, representing a 50% reduction in two years (NSPCC, 2011; NSPCC, 2012i).

As such, we have seen many groups staking their claim to be seen as more worthy recipients of government funding or public donations than their counterparts, with one strategy being to publish research which claims to provide compelling evidence as to the scale of the problem they are dealing with, and the effectiveness of their interventions (McLaughlin, 2011).

In this paper I wish to look at some of the tactics utilised by advocacy groups in order to establish the legitimacy of their particular concern. I focus on material published by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Action for Children (AFC) between 2010 and 2012 in relation to child maltreatment, critically analysing them from a social constructionist standpoint and drawing on aspects of moral panic theory such as signification spiral and category conflation (Cohen, 1972). Whilst utilising insights from moral panic theory the paper is not about moral panics *per se*, my main concern is with using aspects of it as a framework to analyse the chosen literature.

Method

The NSPCC and AFC were chosen due to their high media profiles, the currency of their campaigns and also because their intention was not only to raise awareness of certain issues and generate increased public and governmental funding, but also to instigate changes to both social policy

and the law in relation to children. Publications by both organisations were purposively selected for analysis. The period between2010-2012 was chosen for two reasons. First, for currency, as I am interested in contemporary social policy and public debate, and this was a period of heightened societal anxiety over children's safety, specifically around sexual abuse, something that has, if anything, increased following the numerous allegations made against the late television and radio presenter Jimmy Savile and other cases where historical sexual abuse has been alleged (Furedi, 2013a). Second, it was felt that this short time period would keep the data to a manageable size. The chosen documents were analysed utilising aspects of thematic and critical discourse analysis drawing on aspects of moral panic theory, specifically those of 'category conflation' and 'signification spiral' (Cohen, 1972). The use of signification spiral and category conflation helped in the identification of both rhetoric and metaphor as linguistic devices within the documents. The use of such linguistic techniques from a moral panic perspective is an attempt to generate the desired effect on the public, be that outrage, a clamour for 'something to be done', moral obligation to help and/or to make a financial donation. In this respect, the documents are not merely descriptive but constructive. In parallel to this, comparative analysis was undertaken in relation to the use of language in the more academic publications and their subsequent reconfiguration for media and public consumption.

Moral Panics and Children

At the time of writing, 2013/14, the issue of the historical abuse of children is high on the political, media and judicial agenda. Revelations about the sexual abuse of young boys and girls by Jimmy Savile, the late television presenter and disc jockey, prompted a high profile police investigation, Operation Yewtree, into historical cases of sexual abuse that has led to the arrest of several other celebrities who have found themselves accused of sexual assaults against children and young adults that allegedly occurred over the past forty years.

There is nothing new about societal anxiety being expressed in the form of moral concerns over both the treatment and upbringing of children, often interwoven with concerns over childhood sexuality; Victorian society, for example, frequently experienced such moral panics (Clapton *et al.* 2013a). However, arguably, since the 1970s such panics and scandals have become a more ever-present feature of British society. These have often involved social workers who have been pilloried for either failing to protect children from serious abuse or murder at the hands of their carers (such as in the case of Baby P or Victoria Climbie), or of intervening too readily into the privacy of family life and over-zealously removing children from their parents (such as in Cleveland or Orkney) (Rogowski, 2010). In addition, panics over the predatory paedophile, stranger-danger and familial child abuse have never been too far from the headlines in the past 20-30 years.

In light of this, the current scandal surrounding Jimmy Savile and his activities whilst he worked at the BBC can be seen as merely the latest in a long line of panics over the safety of our children. However, it is the

longevity of the panics that for Furedi (2013a) makes the present period different from when Stanley Cohen published his classic book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* in 1972. Moral panics, as traditionally conceived, were short-lived and tended to evaporate as society worked to restore its moral bearings. However, today, by contrast, there is little moral consensus that contemporary society can cohere around, perhaps with the exception of child abuse, which, in turn, allows child abuse campaigners to carry on their mission convinced in the goodness of their endeavour. In this respect, Furedi (2013a) prefers the term 'moral crusade' to describe the current concern over the safety of children. Furedi's argument is given added weight following the furore that followed the publication of an article in the online magazine *spiked* that questioned the current fixation with investigating historical allegations of sexual abuse (Hewson, 2013). Following the article's publication its author, Barbara Hewson, received much media hostility, online abuse and calls for her to be sacked from her job as a barrister. The NSPCC reportedly asked her to revise or retract her article, giving the impression that it is unwilling to have anyone question its version of how society should respond to such issues (Furedi, 2013b). This echoes with Becker's (1963) point about 'moral entrepreneurs' holding on to an absolute ethic that sees the unquestionable truth and goodness in their work. From such a position no dissent can be tolerated. The NSPCC's advocacy work has been criticised before. In relation to its 'Full Stop' campaign which aimed to stop child abuse, Furedi (2001) argued that it made exaggerated claims about the dangers facing children, whilst Pritchard went further arguing that the NSPCC campaign

could unwittingly increase the likelihood of children being killed. He stated that, 'While 50 children are murdered each year over 250 are killed in motor accidents. If, as a result of the NSPCC advice, more children ride in cars because their parents won't allow them to walk on the streets then statistically more children will end up being killed in car crashes' (quoted in Rayner, 1999, online).

Becker (1963) used the term 'moral entrepreneurs' to refer to those who use the media to galvanise public opinion and who have a righteous belief in both their own virtue and of the evil to which their campaign is directed. Cohen (1972) further developed the term in his work on moral panics. A similar term, 'claims makers' (Jenkins, 1992) also refers to individuals and groups who aim to channel public concern around a particular issue, often through a process of 'net-widening' or 'signification spiral' (Cohen, 1972), whereby more and more incidents get viewed as symptomatic of the problem.

Whilst it is legitimate to subject the NSPCC and AFC campaigns to critical scrutiny, it is also important to acknowledge that child maltreatment was an issue in the past and that it remains so today. In this respect children's campaigners do attempt to highlight and alleviate a very real problem. The issue then is not so much as to whether the problem exists but the extent of it and the way it is presented and used. It is in attempting to answer this question that we can begin to discern some problematic tendencies within advocacy research.

How Safe Are Our Children?

It is not an easy task to try and quantify the extent of child maltreatment,

and the task is exacerbated due to definitions of what constitutes maltreatment varying both culturally and historically. For example, Clapton *et al.* (2013a) cite studies that give rates ranging from 1% to 40%.[1] They also note that such definitional and statistical issues do not prevent writers such as Bolen (2001), from concluding that 'child sexual abuse is of epidemic proportions' (p.80), although, as I will discuss below, it is more often termed a 'hidden epidemic', the reported rates being often said to be only 'the tip of the iceberg'.

If it is difficult to quantify the dangers posed to our children it follows that it is also difficult to know how safe they are. Nevertheless, that does not preclude the undertaking of research to improve our knowledge as to the true extent of the problem. Indeed, *How Safe Are Our Children?* (Harker *et al.* 2012) is the title of a research report commissioned and published by the NSPCC. As the title suggests it looks into child safety, but, I would suggest that the wording of the title does more than indicate the aim of the report, it also works to call into question the safety of our children. It instils a sense of doubt, a sense of unease, that perhaps, contrary to what we believe, our children are not safe. After all, if they really were safe, why ask the question? However, there is cause for optimism, with the overview to the report stating that,

> In some ways today's children are safer from abuse and neglect than those of previous generations. The child homicide rate is in decline. Fewer children are dying as a result of assault or suicide ... and it

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1 For a summary of international prevalence studies of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect from 2000-1010 see Radford *et al.*(2011) pp.180-191.

does appear that the prevalence of child maltreatment is declining in the UK.

(Harker *et al.* 2012, p.4)

The report cites official figures that found that child homicides have fallen by 30%, child mortality rates due to assault and undetermined intent have fallen by 63%, and suicides by 16-19 year olds have reduced by 26% in England and Wales since the early 1980s. This echoes findings from another NSPCC report published a year earlier (Radford *et al.* 2011), which 'found that the rates of child maltreatment reported by young adults aged 18-24 were lower in 2009 than in 1998' (p.6). The prevalence of physical violence also reduced significantly between 1998 and 2009 as did 'experience of prolonged verbal aggression at home, school or elsewhere', whilst the figures for 'coercive sexual activity' also indicate a decline (ibid. p.14).

Such positive developments in children's welfare are welcomed by the NSPCC, but they may, in one respect, cause it a problem. Within social policy there is often fierce competition for limited funds, creating the paradox that 'good news' may not be something that the organisation wishes to significantly publicise. After all, if children really are safer than they've ever been, it could be argued that the NSPCC and similar organisations such as AFC require less government funding and public donations than they currently receive. This is not solely a dilemma for advocacy organisations. As one Director of Social Services said when hearing about encouraging research outcomes, 'I am pleased about the results but don't shout too loud, because if the elected members think

we're doing well they will cut the budget' (quoted in Pritchard and Williams, 2010, p. 1715).

However, there are several tactics employed in an attempt to keep the issue of child abuse in the political arena and public consciousness. These include signification spiral and category conflation, hyperbole and the use of metaphor as the findings are offered up for public and media consumption.

Making good news bad: Category conflation and signification spiral

As shown above it is not the case that the NSPCC report fails to acknowledge that rates of child maltreatment have declined. However, whilst such positive developments are welcomed, the discussion does not dwell on them and is quick to move away from the positives to focus on more negative outcomes. The report quickly warns us that there is no room for complacency as the extent of child abuse and neglect remains deeply worrying and 'it is an *outrage* that more than one child a week dies from maltreatment and that one in five children today have experienced serious physical abuse, sexual abuse or severe physical or emotional neglect' (Harker *et al.* 2013, p.4, my emphasis). That it is identified as an outrage has the rhetorical effect of foreclosing debate, to criticise would be to defend the outrageous. To prevent us from getting complacent over the threats still faced by our children we are also informed that 'new kinds of threats are emerging, particularly with the increasing amount of time children spend in the digital world. As many as one in four 11 and 12 year olds experience something on a social networking site that bothers them almost every day' (ibid.).

In the space of three paragraphs the NSPCC report has gone from admitting that the situation is better than for previous generations, to the claim that 52 children a year die of maltreatment, 20% have experienced maltreatment and that a quarter of 11 and 12 year olds are 'bothered' by something they see or read online each day. With the more credible hard statistics, such as those showing a decline in child mortality rates, emphasising the positive, the focus moves to more vague and subjective issues to highlight a widespread problem. For example, what does it mean to 'have experienced maltreatment', what does 'bothered by' mean? These are very subjective terms and can conflate the serious with the more mundane aspects of growing up and negotiating a path to adulthood.

The way the term maltreatment is defined is itself indicative of the expansion of the concept of abuse and the conflation of categories. For example, the NSPCC's 2011 report defines maltreatment as 'all forms of physical/and or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of trust or power' (Radford, *et al.* p.9). As Furedi (2013a) notes, such a definition does not differentiate between adult perpetrators of child abuse and the acts of other children. In addition, the definition of emotional abuse is so wide that any parenting strategy of which the NSPCC disapproves can be redefined as a form of maltreatment. From a sociological perspective this can be viewed as an example of *signification spiral* which leads to the convergence of categories and 'occurs when two

or more activities are linked in the process of signification as to implicitly or explicitly draw parallels between them' (Hall *et al.* 1978, p.223). The linking of new concerns with pre-existing fears helps to raise the profile of the new campaign. They work alongside the existing narrative of child abuse to gain public and media attention. It is this process that gives vague terms such as 'have experienced maltreatment' and seen or heard something that 'bothers them' their discursive power. In and of themselves they are relatively weak terms, but by being set within a framework of wider notions of child abuse they gain resonance as signifiers of widespread child maltreatment.

A similar process of signification spiral occurs in relation to the way child neglect is defined in the research conducted by *Action for Children* (AFC). Somewhere between the NSPCC's detailed reports and its media releases (discussed below) there are 'reports' that attempt to summarise research and knowledge in a very accessible way for public consumption, but are often not far short of advertising campaigns on behalf of the respective agencies. *Action for Children's* February 2010 publication *Neglecting the Issue: Impact, causes and responses to child neglect in the UK* (AFC, 2010a) exemplifies this trend, being another example of advocacy research that is designed more for public and media consumption than to furthering the boundaries of knowledge. It is worth analysing in a little detail.

The report acknowledges that defining child neglect is not an easy thing to do and cites the English government's definition as being:

> The persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or

psychological needs,   likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. It may   involve a parent or carer failing to provide adequate food, shelter or clothing, failing to protect a child from physical harm or danger, or the failure to ensure access to

   appropriate medical care or treatment. It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.

(ibid. p.4)

However, in another example of signification spiral AFC argue that child neglect must be viewed in its *broadest sense* as when a child is not having its needs met in the following aspects of its life: basic daily care (food, clothing, shelter and warmth); safety, health care and stability; emotional warmth; stimulation; guidance and boundaries. On page six, written in red, and placed within a black perimeter with space around it in order for it to stand out, is the following information: 'Studies suggest up to 10 percent of children in the UK experience neglect – **that's almost 1.5 million**' (ibid. p.6, emphasis in original).

This eye-catching statistic certainly works to draw our attention to the prevalence of child neglect. However, on closer inspection we find that we are not informed what to 'experience neglect' means. No source for the claim is given in the highlighted quote, but in the general text of the report, where the claim is also made, the source is given as coming from the NSPCC's report *Child Abuse and Neglect in the UK today* (Radford *et al*. 2011). However, that report asked about *lifetime experiences* of neglect and also contained a wide array of 'neglectful' situations and/or experiences. For example, following the statement that 'when someone is

neglected, it means that the grown-ups in their life didn't take care of them the way they should. They might not get them enough food, take them to the doctor when they are ill, or make sure they have a safe place to stay', it goes on to ask 'At any time in ([CHILD]'s/your) life, (was[CHILD]/were you) neglected?' or 'At any time in your life, did (child/you) have to go to school in clothes that were torn, dirty or did not fit because there were no other ones available?' Other signs of neglect given include having a parent who does not help with their child's homework, or who may have left them in the car whilst they popped into a shop (Radford *et al*. 2011, p.130).

The headline grabbing figure of 1.5 million children experiencing neglect is not meant to convey to the reader the triviality or infrequency of many aspects of what AFC or the NSPCC classify as neglect, rather the headline grabbing statistic is meant to convey to the reader the gravity of the situation. In addition, no discussion is made of the contested nature of memory. Memory is not replayed like a dvd, it is interpretive, as much influenced by the concerns of the present as the events of the past (Haaken, 2000). Often, it is this complexity of memory, meaning and experience that gets lost when past experiences are uncritically accepted using the frameworks of the present.

Hyperbole and 'Startling Figures'

The use of hyperbole to gain the reader's attention is a common tactic within advocacy research, given that many such reports also serve as advertisements for the organisations who publish them (Gilbert, 1997). As

noted above with the AFC report, the use of eye-catching techniques similar to those employed by advertising agencies is not uncommon. A later AFC report adopts a similar tactic. Written in a larger font than the text on the rest of the page and in red ink as opposed to the black of the rest of the text, the report informs us that 'Child neglect is the most pervasive form of child abuse in the UK today. It robs children of the childhood they deserve and leaves broken families, dashed aspirations and misery in its wake' (AFC, 2012a, p.3). This not only serves to situate neglect as a highly prevalent and insidious problem, the consequences are portrayed as severe not only for the children but their wider family. 'Neglect' is given agency, children and their parents reduced to objects, neglect being characterised as a thing that 'robs' children of 'the childhood they deserve'.

It can be difficult not to gain the impression that for many campaigners the extent of the problem is an *a priori* 'truth' with the research merely serving to confirm their pre-existing beliefs. At times, though, such organisations do admit to being surprised by the results that they find. For example, in February 2010, AFC published a report that aimed to 'raise awareness' of the extent of child neglect in the UK. The report's authors had spoken to a range of people including 'the general public, childcare professionals such as nurses and nursery workers, police, social workers and children themselves' about their knowledge and experiences of child neglect. Analysing the data they state that, '*The results have been startling, even to us*. Child neglect is everywhere' (AFC, 2010a, p.2, my emphasis). Such rhetoric imbues the report, for example, we are told that

we must '*rescue* the thousands of children who live with its *devastating effects* every single day' and a response is needed '*urgently* '(AFC, 2010a, p.2, my emphasis).

According to AFC the views of children were insufficiently considered in this report and therefore more research was necessary to establish children's views around neglect, something that was addressed by them in a later report published in October 2010. After speaking to over 3,000 eight to twelve year olds the authors found that, '*The results were startling – even to us*. They suggest that the signs of neglect are rife in classrooms, playgrounds and activity clubs the length and breadth of the country' (AFC, 2010b, p.2, my emphasis).

Two reports into the same issue published eight months apart both with '*startling results'* suggests that maybe the researchers were not as startled as they claim to have been, and that perhaps they would have only been truly startled if their results had found negligible levels of child neglect. However, the same term is favoured due to its rhetorical benefits. Not only are the results startling, but the addition of 'even to us' conveys additional sensationalism to the lay reader. After all, if the results can startle the 'experts' then they should horrify the general public. To not be startled or horrified can be portrayed as an unreasonable and uncaring position.

There is also a tendency to substitute anecdote for rigorous research. For example, AFC's 2012 report titled *Child neglect in 2011* informs us that, 81 per cent of staff within universal services such as primary school teachers, nursery staff and health professionals, 'have come across

children that they *suspect* have been neglected' (AFC, 2012a, p. 9, my emphasis). In addition, social workers within the Children and Family Court Advice and Support Service (CAFCASS) are reported as saying that they 'often identify children who are experiencing emotional neglect as a result of parental separation', and that 'staff in youth offending teams in England stated that they can often trace young people's behaviour back to early and current neglect within the home' (p.10). We are also told that there are high numbers of children experiencing 'borderline neglect' and who therefore fall below the criteria for professional intervention. However, such figures and claims are as likely to cloud our understanding as they are to enlighten us. For instance, what does 'suspect' mean in this regard, what evidence did they have for this suspicion, and what definition of neglect was being used are obvious questions. It is certainly likely that a parental separation that leads to court proceedings will impact negatively on all involved parties, including the children, but again we are not told how CAFCASS staff defined emotional neglect; did they all use the same definition or did they each work to their own definitional criteria to further compound the subjectivity of assessing neglect? A similar definitional problem arises with the youth offending team's claims, and we are also presented with a very deterministic and simplistic view of childhood. In addition, it could just as easily be said that children considered to be experiencing 'borderline' neglect are children who are *not experiencing neglect*. This is an issue, for, as one focus group respondent notes, there has been a rise in referrals to the extent that social care agencies can struggle to identify children in the most urgent

situations. Encouraging investigations for children not experiencing neglect is unlikely to help such a situation. The manipulation of political and public perception of the scale of a problem runs the risk that we can inadvertently take some things too seriously to the detriment of other more pressing social policy concerns (Cohen, 1972).

Spreading the Word: Media and Metaphor

The ability to generate high media coverage for your particular area of concern is a crucial factor within contemporary political life. If the ability to generate favourable press coverage can make the difference between electoral victory and defeat for political parties (witness the rise of the political party 'spin-doctors'), it can be the difference between survival and oblivion for advocacy groups. Whilst modern communication systems have exacerbated this trend, in and of itself it is not a new development. For example, Dr Barnado has been accused of doctoring the 'before and after' photographs of the children who came into his shelters in order to maximise publicity and generate public outrage (Clapton *et al.* 2013a). At this time, the late 18th, early 19th century, the tactics employed by philanthropists and welfare agencies were designed to shock the public and 'involved lurid descriptions of child imperilment in dens of iniquity and vice, with the sexual element stressed to prick (and pique) the consciences of middle class Britain', and such campaigns did gain much media attention and often influenced policy and statute (ibid. p.6). For Behlmer (1982), the NSPCC's speciality was 'the orchestration of public concern for the physical well-being of the young' (p.159).

This acknowledgement of the need to use the media to gain high and

favourable press coverage is still evident within today's NSPCC. If the more detailed research provides some sense of balance and perspective with regards to the extent of child maltreatment (methodological issues, signification spiral and category conflation notwithstanding), this is not carried forward into the NSPCC's press releases. For example, a search of the press release page of its website for 2012 found headlines such as:

1. Nearly a thousand registered child sex abusers reoffended (NSPCC, 2012a)

2. Saville case prompts surge in calls to NSPCC about children suffering sexual abuse right now (NSPCC, 2012b)

3. NSPCC: Babies still at high risk five years after the death of Baby Peter (NSPCC, 2012c)

4. NSPCC warns of child neglect crisis as reports to its helpline double (NSPCC, 2012d)

5. Children who witness family violence more likely to carry a weapon, seriously harm someone or be excluded from school (NSPCC, 2012e)

6. 'Sexting' from peers more concerning than 'stranger danger' to young people warns the NSPCC (NSPCC, 2012f)

7. New mums struggling to cope warns NSPCC (NSPCC, 2012g)

Such headlines can be interpreted as being intended to give the impression of a significant social problem that requires attention, to inculcate a sense of unease in the general public over the safety of children. They are directed at the public's emotions. It could be argued

that such media offerings are of more help to the NSPCC's public profile and income by way of public donations than they are to those concerned with social policy formation regarding children and families or those working on the frontline (such as social workers), or indeed to children themselves. What, for example, do we gain from 'knowing' that 'sexting' is of more concern to young people than stranger danger? The media release is based on a focus group study of only 35 children, but the juxtaposition of both terms not only works to influence public perception towards the view that there is a serious problem with childhood peer to peer text communication. It also uses the public's anxiety over stranger danger, which may equate to 'stranger abduction' in many people's minds, something which is relatively rare and which the vast majority of people will only deal with vicariously via the media, with a more mundane issue, but one which most parents can relate to given the ubiquity of mobile phones and social media. Similarly, the use of the case of Baby Peter in the headline about babies still being at high risk is meant to convey a sense of urgency and imminent tragedy if something is not done.

Similarly, the figures on reoffending tell us little about recidivism in percentage terms or what the further offences were. Perhaps they were for crimes unrelated to children. We do not know as official figures do not give such detail, and a close reading of the press release finds that it is this that the NSPCC wants to address, calling for a breakdown to be given of the precise crimes committed by registered sex offenders.

Nevertheless, the headline gives the impression that a substantial number of children are being put at risk from repeat offenders. Likewise, when the overall picture is one of improvement in childhood deaths, the dramatic headline 'babies still at high risk' drawing on the emotional power of the Baby Peter tragedy is needed to capture the public's attention.

Another common tactic within advocacy research is to inform us that no matter what the research shows, its findings are likely to be 'the tip of the iceberg'. For the NSPCC, the numbers of children identified as being 'groomed' in its report into this area is likely to be 'the tip of the iceberg' (NSPCC, 2012h, p.3), as are the reported cases of internet and mobile phone abuse, with the hidden part of the iceberg here representing an 'e-safety timebomb' (NSPCC, 2013, online). For AFC the known rates of child neglect are also only 'the tip of the iceberg' (AFC, 2012a, p.6).

The use of such a metaphor is a powerful rhetorical tool. In essence, 'metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p.5). As a form of communication metaphors are intended to create new meaning, to change a person's thinking, to get them to view something in a different way (this is why they are commonly used in counselling and therapy). In addition, metaphorical concepts 'can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the metaphor that are inconsistent' with it (ibid. p.10). In such a way, 'the tip of the iceberg' metaphor also works to take our attention away from the reductions in child maltreatment and helps to construct a picture of hidden malevolence beneath the more positive messages from the research. In this respect, the 'tip of the iceberg' metaphor not only informs

us that most cases of said abuse/neglect are unreported or unknown and therefore need urgent attention, it also implies that beneath the surface appearance of family and community life there is a large hidden sphere within which children are regularly abused.

Conclusion

Contemporary society faces many problems and there is an urgent need to gain accurate information as to the true extent of such problems so that, where necessary, social policy and related provision can be delivered as effectively as possible. Campaigning groups do have an important role to play in highlighting such issues and also in providing services to support people who require emotional or practical assistance. Indeed, a thriving civil society is reliant on people taking an interest in tackling the problems within their communities and wider society.

However, it cannot be denied that many organisations require substantial sums of money and brand profile in order to survive and have some stability; both are prerequisites if they are to help improve knowledge and/or provide practical help to the objects of their concern. As such, attempts to get noticed can lead to problem exaggeration and media manipulation, tactics which may help the organisation survive but can be detrimental to social policy formation as it gets skewed, not according to need, but towards those whose benefactors have the best marketing department.

In this respect, highlighting the use of signification spiral and category conflation within the chosen material adds to the critical literature around moral panics, moral entrepreneurs and advocacy research. This is

important as advocacy groups do have an impact on social policy but the danger is that the impact can at times be a negative one. For example, in relation to social work Clapton *et al.* (2013b) argue that heightened anxiety over children, as claims makers highlight yet another 'problem' that represents only 'the tip of the iceberg', can lead to social workers being 'unable to discern the difference between genuine and disproportionate concerns' (p.9). For statutory social workers I do not think this will be a major issue, such workers are all too often left to deal with families suffering the most severe social and emotional problems, and whilst the wilder claims of advocacy groups will certainly do little to alleviate this, they are also unlikely to significantly worsen it.

However, where Clapton *et al.* are correct is in their final conclusion where they warn that 'an ever-expanding list of items on the child protection radar has occluded the growing impoverishment and immiseration of many individuals, families and communities' (Clapton et al. 2013b, p. 9). In this respect, they are also correct to emphasise Cohen's (2002) warning that one of the dangers of moral panics is that they *can* manipulate us 'into taking some things too seriously and other things not seriously enough' (p.xxxv).[2]

The purpose of this paper's critical analysis of the above documents was to highlight some of the ways in which such reports are constructed and the problems that may accrue from this. As key contemporary examples of publications intended to raise public awareness and influence social

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2 The key word here is 'can' as the link is not a causal one but is determined by myriad interlinked factors.

policy, such scrutiny is essential if we are to have a more informed debate around social policy and social welfare.

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