

APPENDIX 2

MORAL PANIC NEUTRALISATION PROJECT

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MORAL PANIC NEUTRALIZATION PROJECT: A MEDIA BASED
INTERVENTION

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This article is dedicated to Steve Horrible/Hollywood Williams – a rebel with a cause and champion of the oppressed to the end. All respect wherever you are. RIP.

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Abstract

Moral panics are posited as a major technique used by government in the politics of fear. The central research question addressed was “can moral panic be neutralized?” Researchers (experts) formed a coalition with folk devils (an outlaw motorcycle club) in an emerging moral panic to answer the research question. The contest for public support was played out in the media. Results of the Action Research process are reported using ‘thick narrative’ and included: 1) government calling off its moral panic campaign; 2) a large decrease in public support for the government’s campaign against outlaw motorcycle clubs; 3) increased acceptance of outlaw motorcycle clubs in public opinion polls, and 4) dramatic reversals in newspaper editorials. The case study illustrates actors in moral panics have agency, provides an example of a macro-level intervention through which liberation from oppression was affected and, changed the folk devil’s narrative from terror to joy (Rappaport, 2000).

Key words: fear politics, oppression, outlaw motorcycle clubs

Moral Panic Neutralization Project: A Media Based Intervention

Witch hunts, pogroms, law and order agendas and the politics of fear are a few of the terms used to describe a state of affairs where relatively less powerful groups are designated by relatively more powerful (dominant) groups as a 'threat' which, in turn, allows the dominant group to act punitively and with impunity towards the less powerful group. The social discourse of the dominant group and its instrumentalities is that the dominant group is defined as 'good' by comparison to the 'bad' less powerful group. So, a moral statement is made, but; it is most certainly a moral statement made with political, economic and religious agenda(s) (e.g., Ben-Yehuda, 1980; Lotto, 1994).

The political process utilized by the current superpower and its 100 or so states requires a populist vote (to some degree, at least). In this context, we agree with Furedi (2005) that fear is the primary tactic used by leaders (politicians) to motivate voters to support the elected leader. This is achieved by the leaders generating or sanctioning a threat to the dominant group's interests. The threat elicits a psychological 'knee jerk' reaction of support (votes) for leaders (politicians). It is clearly in the interests of politicians to promote demonization of less powerful groups in order to obtain votes. While basically stated, this is the simplistic psychology of creating a law and order plank in a platform for electioneering in today's political context.

Characteristically, major political parties represent dominant group interests. These parties typically propose harsher actions towards the less powerful as a means of managing 'the threat'. The proposed harsher actions maintain the dominant political and economic ideology. Because of this, they do not attempt to change the status quo by addressing the underlying social issues which force the less powerful to

act in ways defined as criminal or illegal. Indeed, some laws making certain acts illegal (and thus forcing the label of criminal upon those acting in such ways) can be seen as politically driven (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). We argue that this process is fundamental in creating inequity and injustice in recent Western societies and constitutes the fundamental force of the psychology of oppression.

Witches (Ben-Yehuda, 1980), Satanists (Hunter, 1998; Jenkins & Maier-Katkin, 1992) outlaw motorcycle clubs (Hopper, 1983; Hopper & Moore, 1990; Quinn, 2001; Quinn & Koch, 2003), youth gangs (Cohen, 1972; Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001), ethnic gangs (White, Perrone, Guerra, & Lampugnani, 1999; Zatz, 1987) and other 'Outsiders' (Becker, 1963) bear the brunt of the state and municipal levels of government's process of demonization in a world where terrorism has been defined as the main threat to the national superpower's domination. Most 'threats to national security' (i.e., terrorism) are inappropriate 'demons' for voter mobilization at these levels of politics. This is because national threats are not in the scope of state and municipal level political action. The galvanizing threat and subsequent proposed harsh actions to counteract the threat at the state and council government levels must be generated from the existing pool of socially marginalized and relatively less powerful resident in the states and municipalities.

Cohen (1972) first postulated and defined the social and psychological practices used by dominant groups to demonize and subsequently oppress fellow citizens. He termed this process 'moral panic'. Cohen (1972) defined moral panic as

...a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its (the panic's) 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.

Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten... at other times it has more serious and long lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (p. 9)

In Cohen's analysis, moral panic focuses on those defined as enemies of society by virtue of their being a 'serious social problem' and, therefore, deserving of public hostility and/or punishment (e.g., Burns & Crawford, 1999). Solutions proposed by the relatively more powerful to solve the 'problem' are to strengthen social control mechanisms – i.e., tougher rules, public hostility, harsher laws, more police, calls for longer sentences, more arrests and more prison cells (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). The actors in moral panic include *evildoers* and *moral entrepreneurs*, and the action is played out largely through the media. One main effect the media is said to have is that of amplifying the less powerful groups' deviance (Cohen, 1972).

Moral panic describes social and psychological processes underlying the politics of fear (Furedi, 2005), law and order agendas, witch hunts, pogroms and other forms of oppression. Both Community Psychology and Liberation Psychology regard oppression, and liberation from oppression, as central topics. To date, however, there is little theory and few cases reported which describe attempts to facilitate liberation using Cohen's formulations in these disciplines' academic journals.

One exception is Moane (2003) who refers to 'cultural control'. Moane defines cultural control as an act of oppression where "oppressed people are deprived of a voice and excluded and marginalized through control of mass media and culture

generally” (p. 95). Moane explains how this occurs when oppressed groups are represented by false and demeaning stereotypes. We argue that moral panic (Cohen, 1972) and cultural control (Moane, 2003) have parallel meanings and, when linked together, forms a powerful understanding of the process of state oppression.

The following case study reports on an attempt to neutralize an Australian state government’s cultural control/moral panic campaign and, consequently, neutralize oppression of Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs.

Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs (OMCs)

OMCs are often known by their club names, such as Hells Angels, Rebels, Gypsy Jokers, Coffin Cheaters and Bandidos. These clubs reject the value set of mainstream culture, and are governed by their own codes of behaviour. “Devotion to Harley-Davidson motorcycles and a powerful sense of camaraderie are the central motivations to subcultural participation for all currently active club bikers” (Quinn, 2001, p. 395), for many “the club is their family and their world” (Serwer, 1992, p. 120). Members of OMCs are proudly working class in origin and assume many related beliefs and attitudes (Montgomery, 1976; Veno, 2002; Watson, 1980). The majority work at marginal blue collar jobs or small businesses such as bike shops, tattoo parlours etc. (Serwer, 1992). Many are supported through various pensions, primarily military veterans’ pensions (Veno, 2003).

OMCs have been described as a subculture (Montgomery, 1976), a tribe (Hopper, 1983), a deviant group and a minority group (Quinn, 1987; Quinn & Koch, 2003). The classic work of Becker (1963), and his notions of ‘Outsiders’ resonates beautifully with how OMCs interact with their social environment – i.e., OMCs are treated as outcasts by mainstream society, but equally, OMCs reject the ordinary

world, and actively work to present themselves as different from the 'straights'. As Becker (1963) noted, the labelling of Outsider requires an interaction between OMCs and the community they wish to be different from. For Community Psychologists, OMCs qualify as alternative organizations as they hold a clear alternative and collective ideology to the mainstream (e.g., Reinharz, 1984) and as empowering community settings where democratic decisions are made, leadership is linked to skills, there are clearly defined roles, and the community setting acts as an active support system (Maton & Salem, 1995).

In the current academic literature, OMCs links with criminality is contested. The majority of evidence comes from sources closely aligned with government and its instrumentalities. This evidence claims OMCs are fronts for criminal organisations. In the United States, Scandinavia and Holland, OMCs are said to be criminal organizations which primarily manufacture and distribute amphetamines (Serwer, 1992), but are also heavily involved with drugs, prostitution, racketeering, stolen goods, extortion and violence (Quinn, 2001; Quinn & Koch, 2003). In Canada, Ko (2002) argues criminal bikers are involved in recruiting, corrupting and infiltrating law enforcement agencies as well as other illegal activities.

However, substantive evidence from reputable criminal investigative sources reveals a different picture. In Canada, at the Nathanson Centre for the Study of Organized Crime and Corruption (Beare, 2000), in Australia at the Criminal Misconduct Commission (Project Krystal, 1999), and in the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ, 1999) there is unanimous agreement about OMCs and criminality. Specifically, these organizations found that while individual OMC members may have criminal records and some individuals may be involved in criminal activity, OMCs are not organised criminal organisations. Indeed, not all

OMCs are involved with criminal activities, and even the most notorious OMCs have chapters free of criminality (Beare, 2000; Project Krystal, 1999). OMCs state that criminality is irrelevant - they are about motorcycling as a way of life (Veno, 2003; Watson, 1980).

The Moral Panic

Informed debate and rigorous enquiry virtually disappeared in recent times in Australia, when two states (out of eight) decided to make elimination of OMCs the central planks in their election platforms. A state premier⁷ unambiguously stated his intention to rid the state from the menace of 'criminal motorcycle gangs', who he claimed were an organised criminal network, with international criminal links involved in drug distribution, prostitution and violent crime (ALP, 2002).

A series of events had occurred over the previous year, which had set the scene for an escalation in tensions between OMCs, police and government. The OMC requesting our services were involved in a notorious incident which led to tragic events on their Annual Run (a ride that the whole club must go on, usually lasting a week or so). Tensions exploded into violence in a small rural town - OMC members fought with the state police's Special Weapons and Tactics Force. The result was the Commander of the Police and three other police were seriously injured (broken jaw, broken ankles, etc.). On the following days of 'the run', it is alleged, numerous reprisals were carried out by police including one biker having his and the passenger's backs broken, as a police car bumped into his rear fender, knocking the motorcycle down. As well, two OMC members were arrested at police roadblocks and seriously beaten (allegedly by police). The OMC members on 'the run' who witnessed the

⁷ In Australia, the political head of state governments are called Premiers

arrests gathered around the police station armed with clubs and baseball bats, demanding their members' release. Police released the two prisoners immediately upon processing them for minor traffic infringements (broken tail lights, etc.). Over the next six months, police increased pressure on the OMC by raiding and searching homes (The Advertiser, 2001 April 10, p. 4), and OMC club rooms were twice raided (May 5, 2001, and June 21, 2001). By February 2002, as the courts handed down suspended sentences to OMC members who were in the infamous brawl, the coverage from the media increased dramatically.

Newspaper articles began to appear with an acceptance of a 'biker menace'. The government introduced legislation to support their stated aims of OMC eradication. This is consistent with Tester's (2001) 'CNN effect' which suggests the immediacy of news coverage, and the speed of news delivery can have direct impact on the decision making of policy makers in some countries. In the current study, government proposals included:

- bulldozing OMC clubhouses;
- refusing building permits to OMC members;
- 'weeding bikie gangs out of legitimate business';
- eliminating associates of OMCs from the security industry, i.e., limiting a basic right of freedom of association.

The combination of actions led the newspapers to report that the government had 'declared war' on the OMCs (Kelton, 2003).

The State Premier in Parliament, dismissed OMCs as 'scum', and 'meatheads on motorbikes', and claimed they were "murderers, rapists, drug pushers and organised gangsters, responsible for shootouts and bombings" (Hansard, SA Parliament, October 22 2003). Police officers commented in newspapers that OMC

members are incompetent, and hindered by an overall low IQ (The Press, 2004). Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio News (ABC, 2005, March 17) reported that OMCs were not only involved in the drug trade, but people smuggling and sex slavery.

Newspaper editorials were making claims about the “lurid and violent background of bikie culture” and supported proposed legislation as it “appears to be an acceptable use of the law for the benefit of the community” (The Advertiser, Editorial. 2002, April 23, p. 16). There was widespread acceptance and support by other political figures like the Attorney General and the Opposition Police Spokesperson. In other words, a Moral Panic was emerging.

Against this backdrop we were approached by the President of the Chapter of the major international OMC involved in the now notorious ‘annual run melee’. The OMC’s motivation for contacting us was to assist the members and their families to survive the attacks by police and government “to get rid of us” as they stated it.

Veno had worked with Biker culture since 1983 and recently published the second edition of his book *The Brotherhoods: Inside Outlaw Motorcycle Clubs* (2003). He is also a political activist in Australia and has well developed media skills. Due to his contacts and long term familiarity with the OMCs, he was the first point of contact for the President. After initial consideration of the request, he approached van den Eynde to consider the idea of involvement with the OMC and their battle with the state government. Van den Eynde has an extensive history working with oppressed groups and is an expert methodologist. She is also female and this fact would have been much more satisfactory to OMC Members when dealing with women and families associated with the Club. Finally, van den Eynde is a staunch feminist and this provided balance to the ‘extreme masculinity’ of the OMC world view.

After much deliberation and getting our collective thoughts organized about moral panic, cultural control, the politics of fear and state oppression noted in the previous section of this paper, the researchers agreed to meet with the President.

The urgency for an intervention was heightened when OMC members were over-heard planning retaliation for police actions during our meeting with the President. The retaliation was to commence with random shooting of police in remote towns across the state. This rumour was not taken lightly as, in another Australian state; an ex-police member had been murdered by a member of another Chapter of the Gypsy Jokers Motorcycle Club (The Advertiser, 2001, September 3, p. 2). It was in this volatile context the authors agreed to form a coalition with the OMC and work towards ending the escalating tension and violence between the state, its police, and the OMC.

Method

In the social setting, the only logical choice of methods available to us was Action Research. Using Action Research, we were able to identify the goals and the broad tactics which would be used in the research prior to commencement of the program (Susman & Evered, 1978). However, the specific tactics and steps taken to achieve these goals (via the broad tactics) were to be developed as we progressed.

Goals

There were two goals for the project:-

1. Reduce escalating tension and violence between Police and OMCs, and
2. Neutralize the Government's moral panic of OMCs.

Tactics

Four broad tactics were identified to achieve the goals:

1. Empower the leadership of the OMC.

The key areas of empowerment training of the OMC and its President were to:

- (i) Develop alternative forms of action other than violence (i.e., discard plans to shoot police),
- (ii) increase their understanding and subsequent use of strategic planning in the moral panic neutralization strategy,
- (iii) train the President in media skills, and
- (iv) train the OMC leadership in political coalition building and political activism.

2. Influence the media.

Research in the area demonstrates that the way newspapers report events can either increase or decrease reported levels of fear in the community (e.g., Baer & Chambliss, 1997; Barlow, Barlow & Chirocos, 1995). Conversely, media can be used to promote peaceful agendas and reduce the levels of fear in a community (e.g., Rippon & Willow, 2004; Wirth, 1999; Yordan, 1998). Project media goals were to:-

- (i) Gain positive media coverage for OMCs, and
- (ii) develop strong media links between media & OMCs.

3. Political activism.

As noted previously, political activism can be effective in reducing oppression (e.g., Moane, 2003; Watts, Williams & Jagers, 2003). Project political activism tactics included:-

- (i) Formation of political lobby activities by fostering alliances between independent politicians, civil libertarian groups and other marginalized sectors (e.g., anti-uranium groups⁸), and
- (ii) Forging political alliances between Parliamentarians & OMCs.

4. Legal Challenges.

Of course, legal challenges are a tried and true way of combating injustice in democratic states. Project, legal challenges included OMCs:

- (i) Lodging of Police Complaints Forms (PCAs),
- (ii) instigating civil legal action against police,
- (iii) commencing a campaign to analyse police brutality in the State – establishing a hotline for police brutality,
- (iv) obtaining *pro bono* civil libertarian lawyers for appropriate action.

Project Performance Indicators

While the Project was an Action Research Project and will be reported as qualitative data in this article, we also utilized five broad indicators of effectiveness in achieving the project goals: These were:

1. OMC members, families and associates perceptions and reports of Police/State behaviour change, as a result of the program.
2. Public Opinion Surveys of how serious a threat to public safety OMCs posed.
3. Number and content of stories about OMCs reported in the state newspapers.

⁸ Anti-uranium groups are activists who oppose mining uranium (40% of the worlds supply is in Australia), and opposing building any nuclear reactors in Australia.

4. Changes in Editorial comment about OMCs over the timeframe January 2001 – May 2006.
5. Change in status of OMCs as a priority ‘problem’ for political parties.

Findings

The Action Research Process

Establishing an OMC Spokesperson

The current topic upon which the government was focusing for its moral panic campaign was bulldozing, OMC Clubhouses. OMCs’ clubhouses were being depicted as “suburban bikie gang fortresses with fortified walls, lined by razor wire and surrounded by security cameras” (The Advertiser, 2002, October 31, p. 11). The government alleged illegal activities like drug manufacturing and prostitution were being conducted behind these ‘fortressed walls’ and declared their actions were a “part of the war on outlawed bikie gangs” (The Advertiser, 2003, September 24, p. 6). Parliamentary debates record politicians claiming OMCs to be sophisticated criminal organisations, not merely ‘meatheads on motor bikes’ (Hansard, September 2003). Clearly, pressure was increasing on the OMCs as the insults and accusations against them flooded into the newspapers.

The first action taken in the project was to have two OMCs mail the keys to their clubhouses to the State Premier and Minister for Police. The OMCs wrote open letters to the press advising them of their action. These actions were taken on October 7, 2003, and the story went to press the following day. The letter sent to the press contained an open invitation to the Police Commissioner and the State Premier to visit the clubhouses at anytime.

This action was done to make the point that nothing illegal was transpiring in the OMC Clubhouses and there was, therefore, no need to bulldoze the Clubhouses. The next day, the State Premier responded in the newspaper by stating that offering the keys was a publicity stunt and goaded the OMCs with the comment "...if they have these kind of premises, it is obvious they are not conducting knitting circles inside" (The Advertiser, 2003, October 9, p. 24).

National media carried the press release. The State Premier maintained the attack through the print media, and five days later he re-stated his position that "...my suspicion is that they are not conducting knitting circles inside these buildings". However, some newspaper reporters were now aware that there was a spokesperson for the OMC, so they approached him for comment. His comment to the State Premier through the newspaper was "...why don't you bring your huge sense of humour and your little balls of yarn and we'll see who the nitwit really is?" (The Advertiser, 2003, October 14, p. 19)⁹. If this was a 'war', as the government had previously claimed, then clearly, the battle lines had now been drawn.

The second action was to declare 'Open-House' of the OMC clubhouse for all media on October 16. All media were invited to attend and freely take photographs. Telephone calls to civil libertarian parliamentarians (the Australian Greens and the Australian Democrats) gave them prior warning that the event was to be held and offered them a meeting with Veno and the OMC spokesperson to clarify any concerns they might have. The parliamentarians declined to meet; but thanked the OMC for keeping them 'in the loop'.

⁹ We appreciate that the description of the exchange between the Premier and the spokesperson is presented in detail for this article. However, we have included this level of detail as it demonstrates the dynamics of the contest for media coverage. It illustrates that the contest must establish a public debate, using humour and colour by the folk devils contesting the event.

The media coverage was extensive. The 'Today Show', a national breakfast show, set up a live broadcast from within the clubhouse; most media were present except some radio news. A four page photographic spread appeared in the local newspaper (Sunday Mail, 2003, October 26). Interviews were conducted with the OMC spokesman for both television and print media. The Attorney General indicated that he might, indeed, visit the premises. The State Premier continued to re-state his 'knitting circles' comments.

The strategy had been very successful in providing an introduction of the OMC spokesperson and the research team as opponents of the government's moral panic campaign, by tackling the State Premier over the issue of the demolition of OMC clubhouses. However, from a media presentation point of view, the OMC spokesperson looked very scary. He continued to insist on wearing full bikie colours and sunglasses. Large and imposing, with tattoos covering both arms, metal body piercings, and wearing black jeans and heavy boots, he did little to put aside concerns that bikers were a threat. Veno's non-verbal gestures on TV appearances with the OMC spokesperson indicated that he was not completely comfortable in the presence of the spokesperson. More media training was obviously necessary for both of them.

The government's reaction to the Open-House was instant, and intense. The next day, on page one, the newspapers reported the government's intention "to put bikies out of work", and noted again that "the government was essentially declaring war" on OMCs. OMC members were described as "foot soldiers for crime organisations", and the government would enact "tough new laws to weed bikie gangs out of legitimate businesses" Further, people who 'associate' with OMCs would be scrutinized (The Advertiser, 2003, October 15, p. 1).

The State Premier went public with his accusations, including a personal attack on Venno. Under Parliamentary Privilege he accused Venno of being “totally fraudulent, phoney and totally dangerous” (Hansard, 2003 October 22). He added Venno was a “so called academic and bikie apologist”. Journalists noted the State Premier was making his strongest stance yet in the war against outlaw bikie gangs, accusing them of “murder after murder, rape after rape... of involvement in activities from murder through to the illegal possession of rocket launchers, grenades and machine guns” (The Advertiser, 2003, October 22, p. 1). It was clear we were being effective. The scene at the clubhouse for the debriefing following the State Premier’s comments about Venno were ‘festive’.

Few allies were visible at this point in time. However, the OMC saw the results as very positive. Amongst their peers and networks, they reported significant positive feedback. Examples include patrons in fast food establishments observing them ordering fish and chips and then coming up saying to them “Hey, you are the guys taking on the State Premier... GOOD ONYA!”

The clubhouse actions were defensive. This was done to allow the OMC to reduce the pressure of the immediate threat to their clubhouses, and to introduce the OMC spokesperson to the community. The next macro-step in the cycle became obvious - go on the offensive about the government’s actions with respect to the OMC and create a softer image of the OMC.

De-demonizing the Biker Image

The actions decided upon were to put on display for the public

- (i) a clear victim of the government’s actions from the OMC, and
- (ii) the OMC spokesperson’s family life.

Johno (a pseudonym) alleged he had been heavily bumped by a police car while on his motorcycle carrying a passenger on the second day of the notorious Annual Run of the OMC in 2001. His wife had been about to give birth to their first child. His back was broken in the incident, leaving him a paraplegic requiring a colostomy bag. The passenger's back was also broken.

The OMC and the researchers carefully put together the story of events, obtaining statutory declarations from injured parties and witnesses. Australian Broadcasting Corporation(ABC) TV was approached to cover the story. The decision to go with the ABC was tactical in that it is a government instrumentality with the highest credibility amongst parliamentarians in the state.

After carefully investigating the allegations, the producer of the show (called ABC Stateline) met with the researchers, the OMC spokesperson, Johno and the station's News Manager. Following this meeting, Stateline agreed to work up a story with the proviso that Stateline reserved the right to draw independent conclusions based upon their investigations. All agreed.

This agreement meant that now the ABC Stateline producers would seek comment from the civil libertarian parliamentarians and the legal fraternity of the state. The OMC spokesperson and Veno again approached the leaders of the Australian Democrats and the Australian Greens along with other key independents (including The Speaker of the House) to present the case of Johno and his family, as well as the passenger. This time, the leaders agreed to meet. The Leader of the Greens advised us that we should lodge a formal complaint over the matter of Johno and his passenger.

The channel for complaints against police in the state was the Police Complaints Authority (PCA). The PCA answered to the Commissioner of Police. As such, we recognized that it was highly unlikely that our complaint would be dealt with in a

satisfactory (to us) manner. However, we reasoned that, at the least, it would be great press for Johnno to go to the PCA offices with his wife and little child. On the day of filming Johnno looked proud and defiant - he was resplendent in his full OMC colours, tattoos, body piercings, full beard, and metal rings on his fingers. His little boy sat on his knee (as was his usual way), his partner staunchly by Johnno's side, as Johnno weaved his wheelchair through the reporters to lodge his PCA Form. Stateline aired on TV in the evening of December 5 2003.

In the meantime, the OMC spokesperson allowed reporters to view his personal life. The newspapers sought interviews with his daughter who agreed to talk about 'her Dad' and newspaper articles began to feature the spokesperson in the context of "a loving family man" (The Advertiser, 2003, October 9, p. 24). Similarly, newspapers reported on the wedding of a madam of a brothel with the OMC spokesman 'giving away' the bride (Sunday-Mail, 2003, November 30, p. 30). Apparently, these news stories of his family life were received well by the public as media requests for his comments and views increased dramatically over the next few months. He commenced to make comment about issues broader than OMCs.

The impact of the TV show which featured Johnno and his family appears to have contributed to silencing the Premier. The State Premier made no comment and, in fact, was reported to have no comment about the story. Added pressure was coming from independent political allies like the Australian Democrats who described the laws being introduced to dismantle the clubhouses as "the worst proposed legislation since Apartheid in South Africa" and went on to claim it is "the most blatant exercise of discrimination" (ABC TV news, 2003, December 1). Indeed in the 28 months of the study timeframe following Johnno's TV appearance the State Premier has only been mentioned 5 times in the newspapers discussing matters related to OMCs.

We observed average citizens beginning to respond positively to OMC members. The OMC spokesperson literally could not go out of his residence without people coming up to him and introducing themselves. He received his first fan mail from an elderly woman who said that she thought he was doing “good things by bringing the community together” and invited him and his partner to a BBQ.

We noted that some journalists were still writing stories without contacting the OMC spokesperson. In light of this, it was decided that the next action in the cycle should be to consolidate the media-OMC relationship.

Winning the Hearts and Minds of the Media and Average Person

The next action taken to neutralize the moral panic campaign was to make the Annual Run of 2004 a ‘media event’. All media were invited to attend the Annual Run of 2004 which originated within the state, but was headed interstate. Media were invited to attend the run from the capital city to the state border. Veno accepted an offer of a ride with reporters and photographers from The Advertiser newspaper.

In preparation for the run, all members of the Club were given PCA forms and briefed on several occasions about the press on the run.

The Annual Run would finish back in the capital city of the state. However, the pack (riders in the club run) would pass through the beach town where, in January 2001, the melee between the OMC and police had occurred. The small town’s benevolent societies, public officials and key individuals (e.g., the owner of the pub where the brawl had started) were contacted and advised of the plans. The OMC respectfully requested permission to use the camping grounds. More importantly, the OMC assured the townspeople that they wished to come back to the town simply to put the matter to rest so they could move on. The OMC invited all citizens of the

beach town to a BBQ, followed by a band night. Independently, Veno contacted Human Services personnel and other governmental authorities (except police) servicing the town as well as prominent citizens advising them that the best way to manage the arrival of the OMC in town was to create a festive mood and welcome the Club.

The run was timed for the closedown of government in Australia for the Christmas/New Years break. Without government providing news stories, the media had a genuine and colourful news story over the traditionally quiet holiday period.

The OMC commenced their run from their Clubhouse. Media were riding with the pack. At the first petrol stop, a reporter from The Advertiser was invited to be a passenger and actually ride with the OMC on a motorcycle of a member - a first for Australia. Television and newspaper owned helicopters flew overhead; police escorted the pack at the front and the rear.

At one point, a bike backed off from the pack. When the rider caught up with the pack, traffic police issued him a citation for speeding. He immediately took out his PCA Form and the whole incident was filmed by all television channels. A photographer for the Advertiser volunteered to testify in court that the rider was doing nothing wrong. Veno, who was watching the action surrounding the traffic infringement notice and PCA Form, offered comment to the rider to get the police officer's badge number rather than the officer's name, which he refused to provide. When Veno commented that this was a legal requirement, the police officer attempted to arrest Veno for obstruction of justice.

However, a superior officer had witnessed events and advised the officer to "back off, mate". The newspaper reporter on the back of the bike returned to the car at

the state border, and the press 'convoy', as well as some 45 police, went to a town nearby.

That night in the town most of the press and police convoy went to a local pub for dinner. The reporters walked in just ahead of Veno. When Veno proceeded to join the reporters for dinner, he found them bailed up by police officers who were behaving in a manner which expressed anger. However, when Veno went over to see what was transpiring, the police members hastily departed. Upon questioning the reporters and photographer about the incident, the reporters said that police were "trying to intimidate us for taking sides with the bikies". The reporters were upset with police about this. We suggest that this was a key turning point in the response of the media. The reporters subsequently shaped their news stories and editorials to be critical of police use of taxpayers money on the run.

The re-entry of the pack into the state was remarkable. As the pack entered the beach town on the 4th of January 2004 the streets were lined with people welcoming the OMC. The BBQ and the party night in the town was a success with no arrests made. Media coverage of the event was extensive and the consensus of OMC members and the general public was that things had been 'put right', referring to events which occurred in 2001 in the same little town.

The newspaper reporters, by accepting the OMC's invitation, had experiences they are not likely to be able to replicate. These experiences served to inform the reporters and shaped their reporting of OMCs in their newspapers, television and radio articles.

The newspaper reports shaped the situation, with headlines stating "Jokers laugh it up. Town rolls out warm welcome" (Sunday Mail, 2004, January 4, p. 3). Over the 8 day period of the run, there were 16 newspaper reports of the event, all

reflecting the OMCs behaviour and the community's reactions in a positive and accepting light. During this time, politicians were silent in the media. Commentary was driven by the OMC spokesman and by the narrative of the reporters 'on the spot'. Operational police issued careful press releases related to the number of police escorting the run, the number of traffic offences recorded, and commentary about the OMC's good behaviour.

Finally, The Advertiser Editorial of 8 January 2004 stated that Police "... encouraged by the State Government may have over reacted in keeping last week's ... annual motorcycle run ... under surveillance...were the costs justified?" To fully appreciate the importance of this editorial, one must refer back to the Editorial in The Advertiser after the 2001 run (January 8, 2001) which thanked the police for "a necessary show of force". Clearly, a paradigm shift had occurred.

Last Gasp of the Moral Panic

After the success of the 2004 Annual Run, the OMC was content to declare the interventions a success, and return to their normal business. However, the last gasp of the moral panic was played out in spectacular style.

The state's Attorney General attempted to rekindle the flames of OMC moral panic attack. In Parliament, he stated that "bikies have been outraging and terrorizing citizens" in his electorate. He claimed that "residents have reported that a group of bikies and ne'er-do-wells got together in a public park and used a newly installed coin-operated barbecue to cook a cat for human consumption" (Hansard, 2004, February, 17). As a consequence of this act, the Attorney General proposed new legislation which would ban the eating of cats (Summary Offences-consumption of

dogs and cats. Amendment Bill). This legislation seemed to have widespread support from the major political parties during Parliamentary debates.

Radio Triple J reporters chased the story. Triple J is a national radio station, aimed at audiences aged under thirty-five years. It has the largest audience of any radio station in Australia. By far, it is the most favoured radio station of OMC members throughout the nation. Venno was contacted by Triple J, who referred the matter on to the OMC spokesperson – who was by now deft at handling media.

The interview explored notions around the moral panic being generated by the state government against OMCs, and finally, the interview ended in the following climactic statements:

Radio Triple J: So, you can say for sure that no bikies are barbequing cats?

OMC Spokesperson: Well, I have never heard of any reports whatsoever about OMC members barbequing cats. It is just not what we do. Members that did such things would be causing trouble for the clubs and would be disciplined by their own club.

Radio Triple J: Let me get this straight, you are saying to us that no bikies eat pussy?

OMC Spokesperson: (Pauses) Of the barbeque kind, I can assure you that no bikie eats them... any other kind and we would have to take a look at it first.

The comments were pursued in Parliament by the politicians with whom working relationships had been developed. As a consequence, the Attorney General was censured in Parliament (Gilfillan, 2004), and he was forced to apologize for

misleading Parliament. He also added:- “I apologize to the Gypsy Jokers, the Hell's Angels, the Finks, the Rebels, the Bandidos and the Descendants and any other gangs ... (who have) ... been cut to the quick by my remark during the debate”. He added, “I was wrong in some respects”, and then he declared that the animal barbequed was a fox, not a cat; the location of the event was incorrect; the people involved were not bikers, and the incident happened 13 years ago (Hansard, 2004, March, 22).

The impact of this coverage was significant. The humour and wit carried the message that the government was making a ridiculous attempt at demonizing the bikies. The sham was shown for what it was. The OMCs and the BBQ cats have become part of the folklore.

A final investigation - who is the protagonist?

One question was still being debated at the clubhouse. Were the police involved in the melee of 2001 acting as their political masters directed them or were they rogue police who caused problems for a wider section of the community? To answer this question, a Police Complaints Hotline was instigated by the OMC, and notices were placed in newspapers (The Advertiser, 2004, May 22, p. 38).

The Hotline was discussed in detail with the parliamentary leader of the Australian Greens Party who, we reasoned, would be familiar with hotlines and have some experience with his constituency. His advice was that, if we were to get calls, it would be within the first month. Nevertheless, the hotline ran for four months as the OMC enjoyed having, as one member put it “a watchdog on the cops”.

The Hotline was staffed by a volunteer. She was a grandmother... with a difference. The spokesperson and Veno were discussing her possible involvement in receiving and recording phone callers to the hotline. She eventually won the support

of the Club. When questioned about her loyalties to the Club she raised her skirt up, pulling down one corner of the waist of her panties to reveal a six inch long tattoo with the OMC colours and a few colourful key words.

At any rate, she was incredibly conscientious and kept meticulous records of who called and for what purpose. The exercise demonstrated that the police were **not** a general problem within the state as only two legitimate complaints were received and one of these complaints referred to an incident which occurred many years previously.

Performance Indicator Results

There were five performance indicators for the Moral Panic Neutralization Project. These were: 1) OMC members, families and associates perceptions and reports of Police/State behaviour change, as a result of the program; 2) Public Surveys of the relative threat to safety and fear that OMCs posed in the state; 3) Number of stories about OMCs reported in the state newspapers; 4) Changes in Editorial commentary over the timeframe January 2001 – March 2006; and 5) Change in status of OMC's as a priority 'problem' for political parties. These results are presented below.

In July 2004, the OMC was asked to survey its membership to determine if they believed that the program was effective in achieving the goals. All members agreed that the program had helped their situation extremely well. Next, OMC members were asked to check with their families and associates whether they saw the project as effective. From the 20% who were willing to report on their families' levels of satisfaction, 100% agreed that things had improved.

Two public surveys about fear and safety were conducted by newspapers during the study timeframe.¹⁰ At the height of the intervention (mid 2004), The Sunday Mail (2004, July 25, p. 31) reported their survey results which found that 49% of respondents indicated youth gangs were the major threat to public safety. Youth gangs were followed by ethnic gangs and other organised crime entities, and lastly, only 9.6% of the respondents considered OMCs a threat to their safety. The newspaper concluded the public perceived that “youth gangs were a greater threat to public safety than bikie gangs”. The Advertiser, (2006, February 20, p. 2) reported the results of a second public opinion survey which found that the “Public was not impressed with Police Strategy” as the headline read. Ninety per cent of the public saw youth gangs and ethnic gangs as bigger problems than OMCs.

Figure 1 below illustrates the key personalities comments in newspapers on matters related to OMCs.

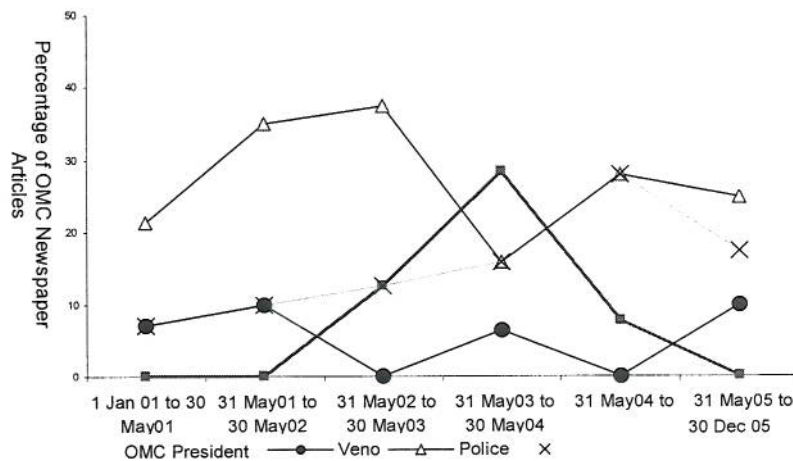


Figure 1: Percentage of newspaper articles where each group were quoted (i.e., OMC President, Veno, Police, Politicians), Jan 1, 2001 to Dec 30, 2005.

¹⁰ The surveys were post hoc and should be seen as indicative rather than definitive.

Figure 1 indicates that the dominant newspaper commentaries on OMC matters was altered during the time frame of the Project. Prior to 31 May 2001, police and politicians provided the welter of commentary on OMCs in the newspapers. Veno was able to present some balance prior to the actual commencement of the Project. Differences are apparent at the height of the intervention (May 03 to May 04) when the OMC Spokesperson was the key commentator on OMC matters. He was able to present an alternative interpretation to events. Hence, we can conclude the intervention was effective in generating more balanced media coverage for the OMCs. When the OMCs downsized their interventions (May 04 to May 05), and subsequently when the spokesperson withdrew from commenting upon public issues (May 05 to May 06), the figure above demonstrates police and government regain ascendancy. However, the tone of the commentary was more balanced, less inflammatory, and more descriptive.

On January 8, 2001, the Advertiser Editorial stated --

Various individuals are now before the courts and those cases will be resolved according to law. We would make the general point that the .. Police, led by Commissioner ... deserve a vote of thanks for their firm action against the threat to public safety by bikie gangs. This was a necessary show of force by the Force and we trust that police will not hesitate to repeat it if there is any need. (The Advertiser, Editorial Comment, January 8, 2001, p. 16)

On January 8, 2004, the (same) Advertiser Editor commented that:

... police – encouraged by the State Government – may have over-reacted in keeping last week's ... annual motorcycle run under surveillance. Forty

police officers to monitor 100 bikies seems excessive. Police numbers in other areas were sacrificed to cope with the surveillance work. But did the means justify the cost?

(The Advertiser, Editorial Comment, January 8, 2004, p. 16).

Finally, in March 2006, well after the interventions had been completed, the Editor commented on a major television program, that:

... major crime involving the clubs is a rarity in .. (the) courts. Government and police tell you that bike clubs are very heavily involved in organized crime, particularly illegal drugs like amphetamines and marijuana. Conversely what you are seeing is that there does not appear to be any empirical evidence (through the courts for example) of successful prosecutions that demonstrates this is indeed the case.

(Melvin Mansell, Editor, The Advertiser, transcript from 'Sunday' Channel 9 TV, 12 March 2006)

Clearly, these editorial commentaries indicate a dramatic shift in attitude and emphasis, pre and post Project. These editorials across the three year time span provide corroborating evidence for measures of general public attitude change.

In January 2001 the editors were openly supporting the government's position, and applauding police actions. As Borden (2005) reports, this departure from journalistic critique and objectivity, is "falling within a discursive sphere of consensus" where "no justification for a lack of objectivity is needed because the ideas expressed have broad agreement" (p. 32), including public support (Hallin, 1986; Hertog, 2000; Schudson, 2003). However, by January 2004, the editors were

questioning the government's approach, and highlighting the expense of the surveillance. This reflects a significant change in journalistic emphasis or, in theoretical terms, a return to a critique orientation by journalists.

The state Australian Labour Party took OMCs off its priority policing platform for the 2006 election. In 2003, the last state election, eradication of OMCs was a major priority of the Australian Labour Party (ALP, 2002). Minor parties (the Australian Greens and The Australian Democrats) also did not include any mention of OMC's in their election platforms. The Liberal Party (the Conservative Party in Australia) maintained its platform to eradicate OMCs via punitive legislation. The ALP won a landslide victory in March 2006. This parties policy changes are a major indicator of transformation, and a major indicator of the success of the Project.

Discussion

Given the success of the project to neutralise a moral panic, there is now evidence to demonstrate that moral panics can be defined as dynamic social settings. Wrestling the powerful elite for control of the media about the group targeted for moral panic also demonstrates that actors in a moral panic do have agency. The view of participants in a moral panic changes from passive to active. This is a major theoretical contribution of this paper.

Our data indicates moral panic may be a central mechanism in both the politics of fear and subsequent oppression of the target group. The results suggest moral panic/cultural control can be effectively neutralized. Neutralizing moral panic seems to ease the sense of oppression felt by the oppressed. The central elements to neutralize moral panic are:

- Effective media intervention,

- Political activism, and
- Coalition building in which credibility is afforded to the targeted group by non-targeted groups.

Media can amplify deviance as Cohen suggests. However, the media can also minimize deviance. We came to the view that the media is simply the arena where the moral entrepreneurs and folk devils contest for control of the discourse about folk devils. This contest is fought between journalists or editors, political elite, government officials, and other official sources (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005). In this instance, in Australia, some of the media were willing to listen and accurately report information which neutralizes moral panic/cultural control efforts of the political machinery. However, the work of Nord and Strömbäck (2003a) caution against cross cultural generalizations, as comparative research in Scandinavia and USA, found that in Sweden, journalists hold sway over the political elites in setting the news agenda, whereas in USA, in most instances journalists align with the political elite and other official sources, and the “media agenda is set by government officials rather than by journalists and editors” (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005, p. 5). These findings suggest that in light of these cultural differences, the point of intervention to eliminate a moral panic may differ between countries and cultures.

Our results have implications for social and community psychologists working with oppressed groups. We agree with Prilleltensky’s (2003) analysis that more action needs to be taken by community psychologists with respect to liberating oppressed groups via psycho-political education. We also agree with many other of our colleagues who suggest that empowerment is a critical component of the liberation process (e.g., Sonn & Fischer, 2003). However, like Moane (2003), we respectfully suggest that education or empowerment is insufficient to affect liberation or

prevention of oppression. What are required are macro level interventions for which our students (and ourselves, via professional education) must be trained. Macro level skill bases include active coalition building, political activism and media strategies to win the battle for public opinion.

The study is yet another example of the central role of applied social and community psychologists to turn tales of terror into tales of joy (Rappaport, 2000). OMC members, and their families, were being terrorized by the actions of the state. The Moral Panic Neutralization Project assisted the OMC to develop a new story about themselves - as 'good guys with political and media savvy'.

Most certainly, refugees, youth 'gangs' and ethnic 'gangs' in Australia and many other Western countries are subject to moral panic attacks. Our task is clear in these cases – facilitate the groups' personal narratives to change from despair to joy by community psychology techniques to influence media narrative.

There are many other settings where the dominant narrative reflects 'overlearned stereotypes' and media sources use these stereotypes to frame their reporting of events about minority or less powerful groups. One example of a setting where moral panic attacks are less obvious but still worth considering the application of our research would be Afro-American students being portrayed in a way that encourages stereotyping and moral panic (e.g., Rappaport, 2000).

Space limitations prohibit a thorough examination of possible applications of our work in other settings, however; if readers stop to consider what they might do with the media to enhance the quality of their client's lives by using similar tactics, this paper has served its purpose.

Clearly our work with OMCs is controversial. Heated by years of political posturing and tempered by a continuous onslaught of misinformation defining OMCs

as folk devils, we had accepted the widely held belief that society might be better off without them. Such is the power of stereotyping and the machinery of moral panic. However, we came to the view in the context of the politics of fear that OMCs are but today's target. No matter what your belief and view is of OMCs, one can only ask" What group will be next identified for moral panic and subsequent oppression or ethnocide, once the OMCs have been destroyed?"

Conclusions

As fear appears to be the primary mechanism used by politicians to galvanise voters in the current socio-political environment, we can expect more attempts at creating folk devils by government and other moral entrepreneurs. This will be manifest in 'law and order agendas' aimed at 'solving' the 'problem' of the folk devil identified. The moral entrepreneurs rely upon a punitive knee jerk reaction by the public to the 'problem' said to be manifested by a marginalised, relatively less powerful group and then amplifying their deviance through the use of statistical manipulation, misinformation and expert support for their narrative in the media (McCorkle & Meithe, 1998). Once defined as folk devils and punitive measures are mooted as being introduced, folk devils experience the psychological discomfort of oppression and rejection by the dominant culture. To the politicians (moral entrepreneurs) the act is instrumental behaviour aimed at obtaining or retaining power. To the folk devils, the broader community of which you are part, now asks you to reject your membership in your sub-culture and demonizes your subculture. The Moral Panic Neutralization Project demonstrates that the actors in a moral panic - folk devils, moral entrepreneurs, experts, media and public - all have agency in the

process and the process of demonization can be stopped. This, in turn, appears to assist folk devils to feel less oppressed and turn tales of terror to tales of joy.

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