

Teaching resource: Folk devils and moral panics

Based on Stan Cohen's classic and pioneering study into youth culture



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Introduction

On Easter bank holiday in 1964 in Clacton-on Sea thousands of young people from the Mods and from the Rockers gangs descended on Clacton beach. The media reported a major riot in Clacton.

Later in the year on Whitsun bank holiday weekend the groups descended upon the beaches of Brighton and Margate. Once again the media reported riotous and criminal behaviour and numerous arrests.

Stan Cohen was a young PhD student at the time and he went along out of curiosity to the Brighton gathering. He found that despite the size of the gathering, behaviour was in actual fact rather tame in comparison to the media reports.

This teaching resource is based on Stan Cohen's classic and pioneering study into youth culture, and how particular social groups are marginalised when they are perceived as a threat to social order.

Using this resource

This resource is based upon the archived materials from Stan Cohen's classic collection *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: the Creation of the Mods and Rockers, 1964-1967*.

It has been designed to be used as an assignment for use in A-level or undergraduate social science courses. Alternatively it can be used in self-paced learning.

Users should read and complete the tasks in each section, then complete the activity stops along the way. Remember to click the back button to return to the resource after viewing each item.

Aims of this assignment

- To gain an awareness of and the ability to access and use the resources provided by the UK Data Service.
- To develop a critical approach to assessing secondary resources.
- To understand how other real-life researchers have approached the study of crime and/or media.
- Learn to apply the theories used in this classical study to contemporary issues.

Reading

A reading list is provided at the end of this assignment, which contains a range of articles on reuse as well as course readings.

If you use this resource for any written work you should also reference the archived collections which you use. The citation for collections can be found in the documentation section of the data catalogue records.

Grading

Throughout the resource you will see a series of activity stops. Each activity has been given a guideline percentage which shows the value of that question if the resource is used in its entirety as a teaching assignment.

Background

About Stan Cohen

Best-known for his innovative work on deviance and control, Stanley (Stan) Cohen's research draws deeply on his own life experiences. Cohen's doctorate research at the London School of Economics focused on social reactions to juvenile delinquency.

While working on this he became fascinated by the Mods and Rockers riots at southern seaside towns, and the lurid press reactions to them. He researched these events through interviewing those involved in the riots, observing first-hand the events as they unfolded, and through an analysis of the media's response to the 'riots'.

Further influenced by the student rebellions of 1968, by anti-psychiatry and by his active participation in the National Deviancy Symposium, Cohen took up labelling theory and the idea of 'moral panics', and went on to write his first classic, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Making of the Mods and Rockers*.

Task

Follow the links below to find out more about Stan Cohen from The UK Data Service's *Pioneers of Qualitative Social Research* collection, and from his obituaries.

[Pioneers guide](#).

[Carry on panicking](#) by Simon Kuper.

About the collection

The focus of this study, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, was on the genesis and development of the moral panic and social typing associated with the 1960s phenomenon of Mods and Rockers.

It looked at:

- the ways in which their deviant behaviour was perceived and conceptualised
- whether there was a unitary or a divergent set of images
- the modes through which these images were transmitted
- and the ways in which agents of social control reacted.

Behavioural questions, such as the emergence of the Mods and Rockers' particular styles, were explored but the primary concern was in the variable of societal reaction to this manifestation of youth culture.

Task

Read more about this collection by exploring the [UK Data Service catalogue record for Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers 1964-1967](#).

Thompson, P. and University of Essex. UK Data Archive. ESDS Qualidata, Pioneers of Qualitative Research, 1996-2007 [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], August 2011. SN: 6226.

Folk devils

The riots

On Easter bank holiday in 1964 in Clacton-on Sea thousands of young people from the mods and from the rockers gangs descended on Clacton beach.

In amongst the groups there were a few minor disturbances with some of the beach huts being damaged. The media reported a major riot in Clacton.

Later in the year on Whitsun bank holiday weekend the groups descended upon the beaches of Brighton and Margate. Once again the media reported riotous and criminal behaviour and numerous arrests.

Stan, at the time was a young PhD student and he went along out of curiosity to the Brighton gathering. He found that despite the size of the gathering, behaviour was in actual fact rather tame in comparison to the media reports.

There were some small fights between individuals and some minor damage to property but it was not on the scale that the media portrayed.

Stan, as a curious and natural sociologist, began speaking to people at the gathering and taking detailed notes of his observations. He was doing participant observation - dressed in clothes which would make him blend in with the group. He got changed and interviewed some of the social control agencies such as the police.

He then compared these observations to the newspaper reports that were being published.

He found that often the young people were given a script to follow in order to perform for the media's cameras and in fact the behaviour was grossly distorted and inflamed by the media.

The media sensationalised the events which created a 'panic', or what he called a 'moral panic', in the imagination of the general public, whilst simultaneously demonising sub-groups of young people – in this case the Mods and Rockers.

Explore the events

- [Explore Google to locate Claton-on-Sea, Margate and Brighton.](#)
- Watch the [video: Mods and Rockers for Moral Panic Class.](#)
- Read [the article by The New Statesman 22 May 1964.](#)

Activity stop one: Folk devils and moral panics

Answer the following questions based on the information you have read so far and from watching the video clips.

1. Who were the Mods? Who were the Rockers?
2. What were the social causes of the disturbances according to the media such as that published by political and current affairs magazine The New Statesman?
3. What do you understand by the term 'folk devils'?
4. What effect might the labelling of subcultures as 'folk devils' have on the individuals concerned?
5. What do you understand by the term 'moral panics'?
6. What might the impact of a 'moral panic' have on society?

(total 20%)

Activity stop two: Folk devils and moral panics today

- Read the article by Marsh and Melville (2011) [Moral Panics and the British Media - A look at some contemporary folk devils.](#)
- Take a look at the tabloid newspaper websites such as [The Daily Express](#), [Mirror](#) or [Daily Mail](#) and identify either a moral panic or folk devils that are in the news at the moment. (For example you might look at the moral panic of the credit crunch and the bankers who became folk devils in the midst of the banking crisis).
- Describe and critically assess what you think makes that particular subgroup 'folk devils' and/or that event a 'moral panic'.

(total 15%)

Perspectives

Cohen's observation of events

You know, what struck me the first or second time was, watching the adults standing on the pier or on the pavement, looking down on the beach, they weren't frightened. I mean, they were deliberate onlookers. It was just part of the treat of the Bank Holiday. But as you got further away, further away physically, but also more importantly, further away socially, the phenomenon took a different meaning.

(Cohen, *Pioneers Life Story*, 51)

Task

Read through the extracts from Stan Cohen's life story interview, in which he talks about how he became involved with this project, the practicalities of conducting the fieldwork, and how he conceptualised his ideas.

- [Cohen's life story interview: Extract 1.](#)
- [Cohen's life story interview: Extract 2.](#)
- [Cohen's life story interview: Extract 3.](#)
- [Cohen's life story interview: Extract 4.](#)

Read through Cohen's observation notes:

- [Cohen's observation notes: Brighton 1965 part 1.](#)
- [Cohen's observation notes: Brighton 1965 part 2.](#)
- [Cohen's observation notes: Brighton 1965 part 3.](#)
- [Cohen's observation notes: Brighton 1965 part 4.](#)
- [Cohen's observation notes: Brighton 1965 part 5.](#)
- [Cohen's observation notes: Brighton 1966.](#)

Note: Cohen's notes are dated '1965' and '1966' although the events actually happened in 1964. We believe this is possibly the date the notes were transcribed rather than the date they were originally recorded.

The mass media

There were also signs of direct publicity-seeking behaviour in the sense that on-the-spot attention from journalists, reporters and photographers was a stimulus to action. The following account is by one of the boys in the Barker-Little sample: 'By the railway station a cameraman asked, "Give us a wave". So me and a group ran about and waved some flags we bought. My picture was in the paper. We were pleased; anybody would be.

(Cohen, 2002 [1972], 136)

The cumulative effects of the mass media, though, were at the same time more subtle and more potent than simply giving the events pre-publicity or gratifying the participants' need for attention. Through a complex process that is not yet fully understood by students of mass communication, the mere reporting of one event has, under certain circumstances, the effect of triggering off events of a similar order.

(Cohen, 2002 [1972], 136)

Task 1

Read through some of the (transcribed) newspaper clippings that Stan Cohen collected about the Mods and Rockers incidences in the summer of 1964.

- [Newspaper clipping 1: Menace of the Mods](#) (Yorkshire Post).
- [Newspaper clipping 2: 'No gear here' for the mods and rockers](#) (Northern Despatch, Darlington).
- [Newspaper clipping 3: Mods and Rockers. What is the difference?](#) (Bridlington Free Press).
- [Newspaper clipping 4: Blaming the press](#) (Daily Mirror).
- [Newspaper clipping 5: The Record says 'Blame the press'](#) (Daily Record).
- [Newspaper clipping 6: Temptresses in flat shoes](#) (Daily Herald).
- [Newspaper clipping 7: Rioting mods and rockers at Margate](#) (Time and Tide).
- [Newspaper clipping 8: I say turn the hoses on them](#) (Daily Herald).
- [Newspaper clipping 9: When a teen-age girl finds pleasure in violence](#) (Sunday Mirror).
- [Newspaper clipping 10: Seaside police beat Mods](#) (Sunday Express).
- [Newspaper clipping 11: Chunnel 'em! MP's plan for the wild ones](#) (Daily Mail).
- [Newspaper clipping 12: 'Blood, we want blood' Court deals with teenagers.](#)

Task 2

Read through the case study of the Baker family, whose son was caught up in the trouble in Brighton in 1964.

- [Baker family case study part 1.](#)
- [Baker family case study part 2.](#)
- [Baker family case study part 3.](#)
- [Baker family case study part 4.](#)
- [Baker family case study part 5.](#)
- [Baker family case study part 6.](#)

Note: Names in the Baker family case study have been changed to protect identities.

Activity stop 3: Perspectives

Based on your reading of the following documents (available in the previous two tabs):

- Cohen's own account and observations of the events.
 - The newspaper articles.
 - The Baker case study.
1. Assess the similarities and differences between the reports.
 2. How can we make sense of how different these accounts are?
 3. How might a journalist's investigation into the riots differ from the research carried out by social scientists?

(total 15%)

Activity stop 4: Methodology

Stan Cohen used a variety of methods in his study 'Folk Devils and Moral Panics'.

Based on your exploration of Cohen's collection and this teaching resource, identify which methods he used and assess what the advantages and disadvantages are of each of these methods?

Could Cohen have studied these events using any other methods?

How might the findings have differed?

(total 10%)

Thinking beyond

Activity stop 5: The London riots

Explore the online resources about the London Riots 2011:

- [London Riots 2011 Newspaper Headlines.](#)
- [Reading the Riots.](#)

Compare the newspaper headlines from the Brighton events in 1964¹ with those from the London Riots in 2011.

1. What observations do you make about the way both events were highlighted and the way in which the people involved were described? (Think about the language used and the images used).
2. What was different (if anything) about the riots in 2011, compared to the riots in 1964?
3. Critically consider whether the press treatment of the London rioters was simply another moral panic.

(total 15%)

Activity stop 6: Thinking beyond

Cohen's theories of folk devils and moral panics have come under some criticism.

Read through the following chapters and create a bullet point list of the key criticisms of moral panic theory.

- Carrabine et al. (2002) *Crime in Modern Britain* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, S. (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: Deviance and Moral Panics* London: MacGibbon and Kee.
- Cohen, S. (2002) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (3rd edition). London, UK: Routledge. Folk Devils and Moral Panics: Introduction to Third Edition.

(total 5%)

¹ If you missed them, some headlines from the Brighton events in 1964 are available under 'Mass media task 1'.

Activity stop 7: The big questions

Drawing upon the materials which you have examined in this assignment so far, and from the wider reading, answer **one** of the following questions.

1. Is 'Broken Britain' really a new concept?
2. Is the idea of a moral panic a valuable concept?
3. With reference to Cohen's study and contemporary examples discuss what are some of the consequences of a moral panic?

(total 20%)

References

Wider reading

Boethius, U. (1994) 'Youth, Media and Moral Panics.' pp. 39–57 in *Youth Culture in Late Modernity*, edited by Fornas, J. and Bolin, G. London, UK: Sage.

Carrabine et al. (2002) *Crime in Modern Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Critcher, C. (ed.) (2006) *Critical Readings: Moral Panics and the Media*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

Eldridge, J. (1997) *The Mass Media and Power in Modern Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goode, E. and Ben-Yahuda, N. (1994) *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hall, S. (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, State, Law and Order*. London: MacMillan.

Jenkins, P. (1992) *Intimate Enemies: Moral Panics in Contemporary Great Britain*. New York, UK: Aldine de Gruyter.

McRobbie, A. and Thornton, S.L. (1995) 'Re-Thinking "Moral Panic" for Multi-Mediated Social Worlds.' *British Journal of Sociology* 46: 559-74. University Press.

Marsh and Melville (2011) Moral Panics and the British Media - A look at some contemporary folk devils. *Internet Journal of Criminology*.

Stan Cohen's publications

Cohen, S. (1969) [*Hooligans, vandals and the community: a study of social reaction to juvenile delinquency*](#). PhD thesis, The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

Cohen, S. (ed.) (1971) *Images of Deviance*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

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Cohen, S. and Young, J. (1973) *The Manufacture of News*. London: Books on Demand.

Cohen, S. and Taylor, L. (1976) *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance in Everyday Life*. London: Allen Lane.

Cohen, S. (2000) *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. UK: Polity Press.

Cohen, S. (2002) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (3rd edition). London, UK: Routledge.

External links

Gareth Morell, (Aug 2011) [*The August riots in England: Understanding the involvement of young people*](#).

[UK Data Service Pioneers.](#)

[Radzinowicz Library.](#)

Dr Amanda Rohloff and Dr Jason Hughes, [Moral Panics.](#)

[UK Data Service Data catalogue.](#)

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