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Framing families: 'deserving' vs 'undeserving' households and neighbourhoods as glimpsed through juvenile panic stories in the online press

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Abstract

Highly dramatized narratives about children have become a staple of late-modern popular discourse - from media-stoked horror stories about child abuse and abduction to more conventional moral panics, often mobilized by politicians and state agencies, about juvenile delinquency and youth deviancy. But, besides presenting a distorted impression of the world(s) children inhabit – and childhood itself - these narratives frequently offer a thinly veiled, simplistic critique of what constitutes good and bad parents/guardians (and good and bad families, communities and neighbourhoods).

Based on framing analysis of selected British national newspaper stories published in print and online during early 2016 – and the reader discussion-threads accompanying them – this paper focuses on identifying contrasting patterns in the way children and families from poorer households, neighbourhoods and communities are represented and perceived in the context of singular, dramatic events. It uses the prism of the 'juvenile panic' narrative – a story positioning the young as victims of moral degeneracy and/or threats to the moral order – to investigate underlying discourses about the comparative levels of 'deservingness' of different children and families, and the types of families (and communities) they are held to symbolize.

The paper argues that, too often, decisions about the relative newsworthiness of child victim and/or threat narratives involving lower-income households are based not on objective news judgment but on normative, largely commercially driven, decisions about their 'deserving' or 'undeserving' status. By juxtaposing tales involving 'respectable' working-class families/neighbourhoods with those featuring 'dysfunctional' ones peopled by unemployed claimants and other late-modern archetypes, such stories act as a proxy for promoting wider societal discourses about what constitutes a deserving community, family and, ultimately, child.

Introduction

News discourses about children have been the subject of significant scholarly attention in recent decades – particularly those that have the effect of framing childhood as a problematic state of vulnerability and/or menace. A consistent feature of these studies has been the concept of the "moral panic" (Cohen, 1972; Hall et al, 1978) or "risk anxiety" (Scott, Jackson, & Backett-Milburn, 1998, p.689), with juveniles cast as (often unwitting) players in baleful narratives about all manner of threats, animate and inanimate – from predatory paedophiles (e.g. Fritz & Altheide, 1987; Best, 1990; Valentine, 1996; Gentry, 1998; Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn, 1998; Kitzinger, 1999; Gallagher, Bradford & Pease, 2002; Meyer, 2007) to cyber-bullies (Lane, 2011; Schrock & Boyd, 2011; Cesaroni, Downing, & Alvi, 2012) to road traffic accidents (Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg, 1990; Lansdown, 1994; Valentine, 1996; Furedi, 2001; Jago et al, 2009) to risky medical treatments (e.g. Mason & Donnelly, 2000; Boyce, 2007). The flipside of this broad narrative frame is that other contemporary news staple: stories portraying *children* as threatening. Indeed, it was studies of such

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narratives – notably skewed towards older children/teenagers and personified as that most nebulous, yet ubiquitous, of folk-devils, 'youth' - that the term moral panic was first popularized (Young, 1971; Cohen, 1972; Hall et al, 1978; Fishman, 1978).

A common thread running through more noteworthy studies of 'juvenile panics' has been a recognition of the implicit cultural, social and class dimensions underlying many of the furores about 'child victims' on the one hand and 'child threats' on the other. Most obviously, Hall et al's seminal unravelling of an early 1970s "mugging" scare in *Policing the Crisis* saw evidence of a clearly orchestrated "ideological displacement" by Britain's elite control culture in the widespread scapegoating of black youths for this near-fictitious epidemic (1978, p.29). The suggestion that such "law-and-order panics" (ibid, p.288) often promote a "racialization of delinquency" has since been explored in relation to more recent UK media and political frames (e.g. Feld, 1999; Pickett & Chiricos, 2012), and internationalized in the form of studies of panics about, for example, "ethnic gangs" in Australia (Poynting, Noble, & Tabar, 2001). Though less overtly concerned with racial connotations, Fishman - writing at the same time as Hall et al - identified an analogous elite-sponsored 'bad youth' discourse underpinning a (similarly bogus) wave of "crimes against the elderly" in New York (1978, p.532). Four years later, Pearson spotlighted the engrained class prejudices permeating many of the successive panics about juvenile delinquency and disorder that have peppered Britain's social history since Elizabethan times, in *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1982). More recently, the spotlight has shifted towards interrogating the problematization of adolescence through the antisocial behaviour agenda, and the particular political and media focus on naming and shaming "troubled" children and families (Phillips, 2011; Great Britain. Cabinet Office and Prime Minister's Office, 10

Downing Street, 2011) – invariably from lower-income backgrounds and deprived postcode areas (e.g. Squires & Stephen, 2005; Solanki et al, 2006; Waiton, 2008). Similarly, scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the bias in media and political discourse towards portraying boys, older children and those from poorer households as, specifically, playground bullies (Valentine, 1996; Jago et al, 2009) and loitering 'hoodies' (Lett, 2010). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that such pervasive archetypes have fed into a widespread appetite for no-nonsense approaches to youth justice policy bordering on criminalization. For example, focus-group work carried out for many of the above studies (e.g. Valentine, 1996; Jago et al, 2009) tends to chime with the findings of more mainstream social research, such as a MORI survey published in 1997: the year in which ASB discourse rose to the top of the UK political agenda with the election of the New Labour government (Squires, 2008). This found firm support among British adults for initiatives including the imposition of blanket night-time curfews for teenagers (ibid).

Conversely, just as studies dwelling on 'child threat' narratives have identified a disproportionate popular preoccupation with the deviancy of children from working-class and/or under-class backgrounds, numerous scholars (and some journalists) have highlighted a distorted emphasis on 'child victim' narratives involving the offspring of more affluent and/or *middle-class* households. Stillman (2007, p.491) developed this paradigm by introducing a racial dimension, encapsulating the dichotomy between "worthy and unworthy victims" in her concept of "the missing white girl syndrome" – an explanatory framework for rationalizing why the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, the photogenic three-year-old daughter of two highly qualified and articulate Scottish doctors, generated frenzied international media coverage (and

police activity), while the attention paid to the 400-plus girls who vanish annually from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, was all-but non-existent (ibid, pp. 491-2). This same theme has been taken up with a more UK-centred focus by Moreton (2008) and Jones (2011), who each draw stark contrasts between the extent and nature of reporting of the McCann case with that of the near-contemporaneous disappearance of nine-year-old Yorkshire girl Shannon Matthews – who was arguably framed as a less worthy victim, *despite being white*, because of her significantly lower-class background.

An extension of such critiques are those (fewer in number) that more explicitly *juxtapose and explore* the middle-class - and/or "deserving" working-class - bias in popular 'child victim' narratives with the focus on "undeserving" working-class and/or "under-class" miscreants in those framing children as threats (Morrison, 2016, p.68 and p.144). A mix of media content analysis and focus-group interviews with parents enabled Valentine (1996) to tease out important distinctions routinely made in every-day public (and media) discourse between *one's own* children and *other people's* – with the two cast as, respectively, "angels and devils". Like society's punitive attitude towards unruly teenagers, this perception of our own children as being (on the whole) innocent, well-behaved and therefore potentially vulnerable and other people's as mischievous, ill-disciplined and potentially menacing has been reflected in more mainstream surveys of public opinion. These include a 2000 newspaper poll in which British adults dismissed their acquaintances' children as, variously, "attention-seeking" (57 per cent), "spoilt" (54 per cent) and "rude" (43 per cent) (Squires, 2008).

Just as media representations of *children* have been analysed academically through the prism of 'us and them' class and/or culture-based oppositions, so, too, have

scholars devoted considerable attention to exploring news discourse around more explicit antinomies between deserving and undeserving social groups, communities and families (or *types* of family). In *Images of Welfare* (1982), Golding and Middleton used a triangulated methodology embracing newspaper textual analysis, interviews with journalists and the public, and official government data to anatomize a then-unfolding moral panic discourse about benefit "scroungers" fuelled by a toxic mix of febrile media coverage, divide-and-rule policy-making, engrained popular prejudices and rising economic insecurity. More recent studies have explored the use of other, similarly opportunistic and divisive, discourses to exploit singular news stories in the service of ideologically driven moves to justify the rolling back of Britain's welfare state. Harper (2014) unpacked the "anti-welfarism" agenda implicit in newspaper reporting of the 2013 conviction of unemployed Mick Philpott for the manslaughter of six of his children in a house fire started as an insurance scam. More significantly, Slater (2012, p.948) has argued that the mobilization of "a familiar litany of social pathologies", including "family breakdown", "worklessness" and (tellingly) "antisocial behaviour" by right-wing politicians and papers since around 2004 represents a concerted effort to "manufacture ignorance of alternative ways of addressing poverty and social injustice", so as to construct a "myth of 'Broken Britain'".

Others, meanwhile, have devoted their energies to analysing more situated poor-bashing discourses, such as the longstanding preoccupation of politicians and the media with the issue of teenage pregnancy (Brown, 2015) and the, arguably less successful, attempt to engineer a more generalized moral panic around single parenthood (McRobbie & and Thornton, 1995). Some, meanwhile, have even developed critiques that explicitly turn society's moral preoccupation with the

supposed degeneracy of the poor on its head: by switching the focus to the *lack of* outrage about the misdeeds of the deviant rich (Lewis, 1988). At time of writing, moreover, an ever-growing corpus of literature is building on earlier studies imbuing socially and/or criminally oriented panics with a racial dimension, by focusing on journalists' and politicians' divisive positioning of foreigners – in the manifold (and often dubiously conflated) guises of 'immigrants', 'migrants', 'economic migrants', 'asylum-seekers' and 'refugees'. Notable studies have included Pijpers' exploration of the "(ir)rationality and political opportunism" underpinning media-stoked fears of "mass migration" by Poles to richer European Union member states following the 2004 EU enlargement (2006, p.91); Humphrey's 2007 critique of the press hysteria attending a supposed wave of "Muslim" or "Lebanese" gang rapes in Sydney between 2000 and 2003; and several works by Wortley, including his 2003 survey of narratives about immigrant-driven crime in the Canadian news, and his comprehensive 2009 review of the international literature on panics linking immigration to criminality.

For all the insights this rich body of work brings to our understanding of the use of 'us and them' media frames to identify particular age and social groupings with the concepts of virtue and vice, surprisingly few studies have yet attempted to meld the two. In other words, there is little in the literature to date that builds on the class and/or culture-based dichotomies that emerge from the study of juvenile panics to examine how narratives about 'good' and/or 'bad' *children* act as projections of deeper, perhaps more invidious, discourses that distinguish between deserving and undeserving families, communities and neighbourhoods. This paper marks a modest attempt to begin the process of addressing this oversight. It does so by both examining the framing of press narratives and unpicking the way in which discourses about deserving

and undeserving individuals are constructed through a dynamic interplay between journalists, their sources and those audience-members who contribute to online discussion-threads. Drawing on discourse analysis of threads published in response to the 10 most heavily debated national newspaper stories about child 'victims' and 'threats' printed on a series of dates sampled in January and February 2016, it argues that such narratives are invariably less about deserving or undeserving *children* than deserving or undeserving parents, families and communities.

Sampling stories: the construction of a dataset

The news articles used as the basis for this analysis were culled from a selection of national newspapers sampled on a 'cascading' basis over 10 weekdays between January 1 and March 4, 2016. Three titles – a broadsheet, mid-market tabloid and red-top – were sampled on each day, beginning on the first Friday in January, followed by the second Thursday, third Wednesday and so on, with this process repeated in reverse from the start of February (i.e. first Monday, second Tuesday etc). In addition to this variation, different newspaper titles were sampled over each of the five-day periods: the *Guardian, Daily Mail* and *The Sun* in January and the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Mirror* during February and early March. The reason for adopting this sampling method was to construct as representative a dataset as possible, by avoiding over-analysing particular days of the week – when, for example, specific features might have regularly been run or issues highlighted – while also embracing a wide cross-section of titles which, in the end, was equivalent to more than half of the overall national newspaper market.

Of the dozens of stories about children identified on the dates concerned, analysis focused on 10 which could be categorized as framing juveniles as either or both 'victims' and 'threats'. These categories were chosen in order to extend previous research by the same author which had, firstly, identified 'victim' and 'threat' narratives as the most prevalent juvenile-related discourses in the British press and, secondly, noted in them a recurring subtext distinguishing between not only victimized and threatening *children* but also parents, families and communities (Morrison, 2016). As for the 10 articles chosen for analysis: quite simply, these were the sampled 'victim' and 'threat' stories that provoked the most extensive newspaper coverage and/or 'below-the-line' audience discussion and comment during the period in question. As in the author's previous work – and other studies of media representations of childhood and youth (e.g. Furedi, 2001) – the range of scenarios presented by the articles was extensive. They embraced everything from a 'classic' child abuse case, in this instance the high-profile conviction of 12 men operating an exploitation ring in Keighley; to tales about a man being beaten by a gang of youths armed with baseball bats, hammers and golf clubs; a head-teacher admonishing parents for smoking cannabis at the school gates; the 'risky' decision by a well-known television presenter to remove her children from school to teach them at home herself; and the similarly morally questioned decision by some parents to allow their primary-aged daughters to take up pole fitness lessons (almost universally misreported as "pole-dancing") - and to 'perform' live in front of millions of viewers on a popular daytime TV show.

Of these 10 stories, seven fell squarely into the 'child victim' category, with two adopting a 'child threat' frame and one a more conflicted approach best defined as 'hybrid'. This story, focusing on a new report revealing that most British children could

no longer identify common garden birds, presented them as, alternately, 'victims' of poor parenting (and teaching) and reprehensible in themselves for being less interested in the natural world than in playing video games and watching TV. The overall breakdown of stories was, then, broadly in line with patterns identified in previous studies, including the author's own – in which, of 325 articles problematizing children during a month-long textual analysis of all British national newspapers, 262 (81 per cent) positioned them as 'victims', 46 (14 per cent) as 'threats' and 36 (11 per cent) featured juveniles occupying both these roles (Morrison, 2016). The purpose of the analysis on this occasion, though, was to move beyond examining the ways in which children themselves are problematized in news discourse to interrogate the subtexts in such articles – and, in particular, how they represent *parents, families, communities* and *neighbourhoods*. The hypothesis was that distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' children (or types of children) often act as a cover for other, perhaps deeper, judgments about what constitute good and bad parenting practices, lifestyle choices and behaviours - and, ultimately, good and bad people.

As the aim was to analyse the way overall news discourse is constructed and negotiated – in the very broadest sense – it was necessary to focus less on a simple analysis of the narrative frames adopted by articles themselves than on the *amplification* of this framing through its extension into discussion-threads published beneath online versions of the sampled articles. For this reason, framing analysis of articles themselves was applied at an impressionistic level – with greater emphasis placed on the use of sentiment analysis to examine the ways in which stories were interpreted and responded to by members of the audience who posted on threads, and how these responses helped to shape and consolidate the overall news discourse.

What the papers said: some illustrative examples

A facet common to many 'child victim' and 'child threat' articles was the use of social archetypes with value-laden connotations to distinguish between a story's 'good' and 'bad' protagonists. For example, the *Daily Telegraph's* report about the man attacked by a gang of 35 youths, published online on 6 January, sported a headline and intro describing him as a "father-of-two" – a detail starkly juxtaposed in the opening sentence with the image of the "mass of teenagers" who subjected him to an "horrific gang attack" (*www.telegraph.co.uk*, 2016). The article – liberally interspersed with close-up shots of the bloody head injuries the man sustained, and CCTV footage of the rampaging youths – went on to emphasize various other aspects of his 'good citizen' status, including the fact that he worked as a "support worker" and was saved from a worse fate by the bravery of his brother. By contrast, the assailants were dismissed as, variously, "thugs", "a mob" and (in the words of the victim himself) "absolute maniacs". In the *Daily Mail's* account, this distinction between 'good' and 'bad citizens' was sharpened still further, with repeated emphasis on the fact that the man was a "homeowner" who had been set upon "outside his property" (Cockcroft, 2016) – a frame explicitly picked up (if not always favourably) by several posters to the accompanying thread. This distinction between "rampaging" youths and the concept of property as a badge of respectable citizenship also surfaced in *The Sun's* framing of the same story, along with an equal emphasis on his family man status – his first thought as blows rained down on him being that he was "glad that my wife was at the mothers and my sons were not in at the time" (*www.thesun.co.uk*, 2016).

The most consistent way in which the running theme of good versus bad citizens was constructed was as an opposition between what might best be described as *civilized* citizens and *feral* or *anti*-citizens. The civilized/feral dichotomy often made for uncomfortable reading, as newspapers - and, more particularly, their readers - sought to define the latter as a form of deviancy associated with, especially, welfare dependency and/or foreignness. Perhaps the most febrile news coverage – and discussion-thread exchanges – were those surrounding the widely reported 9 February conviction of 12 men of Pakistani descent for grooming and sexually abusing a vulnerable 13-year-old girl in Keighley. Although some papers – notably *The Guardian* – pointedly avoided highlighting the men's racial (let alone religious) background, to the extent of scarcely mentioning it, the tabloids treated this as one of the most newsworthy and, by implication, relevant aspects of the story. The *Mail's* headline drew immediate attention to the offenders' ethnicity, and the fact they were all Muslims, under the provocative headline: "'It takes two to tango': As 12 Asian men are jailed for 143 years for gang-raping a 13-year-old white girl, Muslim councillor admits some in community still think SHE was partly to blame" (Dunn, 2016). The reporter opened the very first sentence of his 2,422–word story with the term "A Muslim councillor", and went on to mention the word "Muslim" 17 times and "Asian" eight, often invoking the menacing image of "Asian sex gangs" or "organized groups of Asian men". Conversely, the article repeatedly emphasized that the child victim – and many others to which it obliquely referred – was "white", backed by quotes from local Conservative MP Kris Hopkins, whose assertions in a then recent House of Commons debate had included that "gangs of Muslim men are going round and raping white kids". Again, pictures were a key framing device used to underline the gang-members' deviancy – with offenders depicted wearing hoodies and baseball caps and, variously,

gesturing aggressively or staring sullenly into the camera. *The Sun's* report of the same case took the racial dimension still further, by opening its intro with the uncompromising words "A gang of Asian paedophiles" and including a late section explicitly comparing the Keighley case with an ongoing inquiry into abuses by men from similar backgrounds in Rotherham and other then recent cases in Oxford, Rochdale and Telford (Sims, 2016). Photos were also used to emphasize the defendants' ethnicity, in the form of a rogues' gallery of police 'mug-shots' and pictures of two of them in hoodies – one "grinning", the other "smirking" over a caption relating the judge's displeasure at the "contemptuous attitude" they had shown in court.

More commonplace than *racially* based frames discriminating between 'good' and 'bad' lifestyles/communities, however, were those of a *class*-based nature – if nothing else, because it was only the Keighley story that featured an explicit ethno-cultural dimension. Frames ascribing deviant behaviours to lower-class social groups, communities and (in some cases) individual families emerged from the analysis of a number of articles – though, as we shall see, journalists proved to be remarkably more restrained in the extent to which they *emphasized* these aspects compared to the readers who posted comments beneath their stories. Nonetheless, carefully chosen details often appeared to have been used to 'nudge' readers towards class-based interpretations. Perhaps the most striking example of how this frame was used to distinguish between good and bad *families* (as opposed to children) was in the widely reported 16 February story about a deputy head-teacher who had written to pupils' parents asking them to stop smoking cannabis on the school run. The most extensive coverage of this story appeared in the *Daily Mail*, which repeatedly invoked a 'good parent/bad parent' opposition in a tale painting a picture of a much more widespread

decline in parenting behaviour - by linking this isolated episode (in Manchester) to four previous requests by schools for improved parental etiquette (in Tiverton, Nailsea, south London and Darlington respectively). These tales of parents variously swearing, spitting, allowing their children to urinate in the playground and wearing pyjamas to the school-gates were used to create a polarized distinction between the "serious safeguarding concern" (in the words of the Manchester deputy head) posed by *bad* parents and other "really, really great" parents "concerned" about their children's exposure to such behaviour (to quote her head-teacher) (Cockroft, 2016).

Moreover, the strong suggestion that the errant parents in these cases may have represented a 'lower-class' element – or, at least, a group *devoid* of class, in the complimentary sense of the term – was emphasized through a number of carefully framed details. For instance, we learnt that the head-teacher of Skerne Park Academy in Darlington had written to parents are noting a trend for them to drop off their children "wearing pyjamas and slippers", in some cases "even attending school assemblies and meetings in night-time attire" – a claim of slovenliness calculated to evoke images of feckless, stay-at-home parents. More explicit was the (arguably irrelevant) inclusion of a paragraph relaying how the Manchester school at the centre of the story had achieved only a "satisfactory" Ofsted rating in its last inspection and that the number of pupils "eligible for free school meals" was "at more than twice the national average". Here irresponsible parenting were being intrinsically conflated with social deprivation and (by inference) unemployment and reliance on benefits.

One other common framing device used to portray the deviant elements in stories was to strip them of virtually all biographical information – save for a few scant details that served to emphasize their malevolence and/or sub-humanity. This tactic was often starkly juxtaposed with the much more detailed – and therefore humanizing - biographical pictures drawn of the individuals and families who had suffered as a result of their actions. For example, a story extensively covered on 8 February was the murder of 14–year-old Jordan Watson by three men he had naively befriended – one of whom harboured a jealous obsession with his girlfriend. A typical report was the *Daily Mirror's*, which took pains to emphasize Jordan's loving and stable family background, to the extent of quoting his younger sister recalling "going swimming, walking our dogs…and having a snowball fight" with her "big brother", and his parents lamenting the fact they would never see their "full of fun" son "grow up and live a full life" (Brown, 2016). By contrast, all we were told about his killers was that they were "thugs", had taken a selfie of themselves hours before murdering him and that their ringleader, George Thompson, possessed an "'unusually large' quantity of knives and weapons including a machete, a cleaver, a stun gun, a replica rifle and a block of knives next to his bed" and (in the words of Detective Superintendent Andrew Slattery) had boasted of "money-making schemes" revolving around his "illicit business" – presumably related to weaponry (ibid). These one-dimensional caricatures were repeated across the coverage in every other paper that reported the case, consistently juxtaposed with sympathetic portrayals of (and quotes from) Jordan's family.

Even the Keighley culprits were largely framed as *socially* inferior folk-devils: good-for-nothing criminals who pushed drugs and pimped girls rather than looking for (or holding down) proper jobs. Both the *Mail* and the *Sun* devoted considerable attention

to the gang's supposed "ringleader", Arif Chowdhury, who had allegedly absconded to Bangladesh to escape justice. Both papers defined him as a "drug dealer", with the latter quoting an extract from a message he had posted on Facebook - apparently to taunt police - in which he revelled in his "thug life" as a "gangsta" (Sims, 2016).

Sharing sentiments: what the punters said

Though the frames used by journalists to report their stories may have given audience-members their "lines and stage directions" - to subvert the amplification process anatomized by the late Stanley Cohen (1972, p.186) – it was, as so often, the echo-chamber of public opinion that manifested the socially divisive discourses simmering below (and occasionally breaking) the surface of their reports. Time and again, audience-members would diagnose the problem behaviours and/or lifestyle choices exposed in stories as symptoms of lower-class attributes, particularly welfare dependency – suggesting that the discourse around news, as mediated by journalism itself and the online (and real-world) discussions it engenders, has now become so sensitized to such frames that it takes only the slightest 'nudge' to revive them. But, as in the articles themselves, class was only one prism through which the binary opposition between 'good' and 'bad' parents, families and communities was viewed: the racial dimension of the Keighley abuse case provoked viciously hostile posts, some bordering on incitement, while even articles with no obvious ethnic or racial dimension generated a handful of comments from readers who appeared to blame deviant behaviours on foreigners (often in the guise of the European Union).

As the purpose of this study was to focus less on representations of children themselves than the ways in which news discourse around juveniles can be used to vicariously frame good and bad parents, households and communities, analysis of posts was confined solely to those explicitly commenting on – or making inferences about - families' parenting practices, cultural backgrounds and/or lifestyle choices. The 10 'child victim/threat' stories that generated discussion-threads on one or more newspaper websites produced 5,339 posts in total. Of these, 1,609 (or 30 per cent) included remarks about the parents, families, neighbourhoods and/or wider communities from which one or more of the child protagonists came. While the vast majority – 1,244 (nearly a quarter of all posts) – condemned or disparaged the lifestyles/cultures on which they commented, the remaining 362 (seven per cent) focused on extolling the virtues of 'good' behaviours. However, in relation to all-but two stories (both discussed later), all the posts commenting on parental/community practices invariably *criticized* behaviours they ascribed to families involved in the stories concerned – whether they concentrated on describing the qualities of a *good* lifestyle/family/upbringing or a *bad* one.

By far the most numerous comments about 'bad parenting' were generated by the 16 February story about complaints of cannabis-smoking, cursing and pyjama-wearing at the school gates. This story – reported by the *Mail, Mirror, Daily Star* and *Independent* – attracted 612 posts condemning such practices, 600 of them on the first website alone. Though nowhere in the articles concerned was any direct mention made of welfare-dependent families, this discourse emerged repeatedly in posts on the *Mail* site, with 'Gertie, London' diagnosing the problem behaviours as "a direct result of the UKs 'benefit culture' with kids having kids funded by State handouts and no reason to

work; get dressed; act responsibly or be held accountable", while the self-styled 'Erudite Elucidator, West Midlands' reviled the "sickening" and "feckless people only have children to access housing and benefits and seem to expect the State to clothe, house and feed them as well as teach them". A trope repeated several times in comments apparently aimed at the lower orders (by 'ems, essex', 'Mrs O, Welford' and others) was that of "scummy mummies" – a playful corruption of the term 'yummy mummies' that has become generally associated with well-heeled middle-class mothers. It is worth noting, though, that a small number of negative commenters went out of their way to argue that cannabis-smoking and other such deviant behaviours were not confined to benefit claimants – with 'jojo1993, Manchester' reading into such stories evidence of the "light handedness of the parents of our spoon fed generation", a sweeping statement apparently aimed as much at the (liberal) middle-classes as welfare recipients. Nonetheless, the overall sentiment of the *Mail's* thread appeared to associate uncouth parenting practices with the lower classes. Some innovative punishments were also proposed – from "spot fine and arrests" ('Steve 64, london') to the idea that it was "time to licence parents" ('Ranger 99, London').

Other articles that sparked a number of class-orientated criticisms of the parents involved (and their lifestyle choices) were the slew of reports about a controversial item on ITV1's *This Morning* programme in which eight-year-olds girls were shown demonstrating their "pole dancing" (in reality, pole *fitness*) skills. Though, again, the articles themselves made no explicit mention of the social backgrounds of the children featured on the show (or their accompanying mothers), this did not stop a number of posters using prejudicial language with strong class connotations to decry them. While many posters simply condemned child pole-dancing as a symbol of bad parenting,

without singling out a particular social group for criticism – 'SarahJones2014' did so on the *Mirror's* site by contrasting it with her own, more responsible, approach to being "a mother, youth worker and dance teacher"; several Mail posters reminisced over more wholesome fitness pursuits, like "playing rounders, netball, football" ('kazza123, UK') or "playing in the park, riding bicycles, playing footie" ('WintersGrace, Cheshire'), and one of *The Sun's* contributors described the item as "Pedophile [sic] T.V." and the parents involved as "imbeciles" – time and again the girls' mothers were referred to in socially inferior terms. "Only in This Morning- TV program [sic] for proper CHAVS!" ranted 'Anja, Here and there' on *www.dailymail.co.uk*, while on the same site 'Louise, UK' confined herself to the simple putdown: "Just look at the mothers!" A more oblique swipe at 'lower-class' or 'common' behaviour arguably emerged from the association made by 'Weirworld' on *The Sun's* site between pole fitness classes and the prospect of "Asda" promoting "skimpy underwear" to "go with it".

Although it was class-orientated invective that permeated many of the threads, however, by far the most aggressive and vitriolic 'good/bad family/lifestyle' comments were reserved for the lengthy posts run beneath articles reporting the conviction of the 'Asian' sex abusers. Indeed, the most extreme comments run on the *Mail* and *Sun* sites arguably came close to inciting anti-Muslim violence and religious hatred. For the purposes of this analysis, the posts of greatest relevance were those that explicitly associated what might broadly be termed a 'Muslim way of life' with the deviancy of the 12 offenders – insinuating that there was something inherently warped in the religion of Islam itself, or the cultural attitudes and behaviours it engendered, that normalized and promoted the abuse and exploitation of women and girls. Examples of such sentiments from the *Sun's* site included 'sparkyone75's' sweeping assertion

that there was something "wrong with the Muslim community", the similar claim by 'peteevs73' that "this is another Muslim problem" and 'KB DM's' plea to the British government to "close the borders to stop more of their inbred ilk landing on these Great shores", before reeling off a litany of deviant behaviours he ascribed as Muslim in character – including "murder child rape female mutilation adultery drugs drinking". *Mail* posters were similarly unrestrained in their blanket condemnation of the suppose cultural norms they saw as explaining recurrent child abuse cases involving Asian men, with 'London Trader, London' blaming the abuse case on a "deeply entrenched cultural attitude", 'LauraMack, Glasgow' describing British and Muslim "values/morals" as being "just at different ends of the scale", and 'Fibromite, North uk' declaring that "nothing will deter these vile creatures from what they see as 'part of their culture'!!"

Evidence for the pervasiveness of perceptions that 'good' and 'bad' parents/families/communities could be linked to the concepts of race and culture (as well as class) also surfaced in wildly different contexts. Perhaps most incongruously, 'LillieLangtryy' managed to see in the trend for child pole fitness classes a conspiracy intent on "desensitising the nation into acceptance of the disgusting and barbaric regime waiting to take over" – ending her post with this near-hysterical entreaty to fellow readers: "AT BREXIT. OUT OUT OUT!" Meanwhile, a poster on the *Express* website, 'NotInMyName', managed to conflate the pole fitness fad not only with "grooming gangs" but the girls' "inevitable job prospects", thanks to overseas "invaders". Elsewhere on the same thread, 'LuminosusFenestram' described Britain as ""a culture being poisoned by r@pist incomers".

Of all 10 'child victim/threat' stories analysed, only one produced more than a relatively small number of posts arguing in *favour* of the parenting behaviours or lifestyle choices the articles themselves sought to problematize or subject to scrutiny. This was an atypically conflicted thread published on the *Mail* website in response to the revelation that TV presenter Nadia Sawalha had opted to take her children out of school to teach them at home. In this case – unlike on all other threads, bar those relating to the pole fitness story - 'good life' posts were not used to spell out the attributes of good living from which the story's subject was deviating, but to *counteract* the majority discourse portraying such parenting practices as detrimental to children's wellbeing by arguing (often on the basis of asserted personal experience) in *favour* of home-schooling. So, for example, a typical criticism of the practice made by 'Hyacinth Bucket' on the *Mail's* site – namely that home-schooled children risked ending up "with no qualifications" – was countered by 'Lily, York's' retort that "Home educated children can take qualifications and from a wider range than is available in most schools", with those she knew who had benefited from it including "a senior nurse, a maths teacher, a design engineer, an actor, a graphic designer and a chef".

Conclusion: towards distinguishing 'deserving' from 'undeserving' people?

It would be too glib to infer from a single, small-scale study that discrimination between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' – or 'deserving' and 'undeserving' – citizens and social/cultural groupings is widespread, let alone endemic, in contemporary Britain. However, what this necessarily modest paper demonstrates is that news discourse around popular narratives about society – in this case, the vulnerability and/or malevolence of different types of children and/or stages of childhood – often acts as a locus for the

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manifestation of deeper-seated anxieties and prejudices, including conceptions of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' parenting, lifestyle choices and even community and cultural characteristics. In this particular case, the 'good' was all-too often associated with white, middle-class, 'British' attributes and traditions, while the 'bad' was linked to distorted impressions of the 'lower classes', benefit claimants, Muslims, immigrants and even the EU. What these varied visions of 'good' and 'bad' parents/families/lifestyles/communities have in common is a starkly defined belief in the existence of 'good' and 'bad' – 'deserving' and 'undeserving' – and a certainty that, for every *civilized* citizen, there exists an equal and opposite *feral* or *anti*-citizen. The implications of such divisive (and destructive) thinking – for community ties, multicultural values and the survival of social trust generally – lie beyond the limits of this particular paper, but are of incalculable importance as a subject for future study.

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