

**Shifting the focus?
Moral panics as civilizing and decivilizing processes**

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CHAPTER 5

Shifting the Focus? Moral Panics as Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes

Amanda Rohloff

INTRODUCTION

Drawing from the work of Norbert Elias and the figurational approach to research, this chapter builds on the original concept of moral panic and on the contributions of Alan Hunt (2003, 1999, Chapter 4 this volume), Sean Hier (2002a, 2008) and Chas Critcher (2009). My aim is to assess some of the main the assumptions of moral panic research and, specifically, to elaborate on the *developmental* research of Hunt, Hier and Critcher, all of whom conceptualize volatile panic episodes *in relation to* long-term, wider social processes.

I will argue that conceptualizing moral panics as short-term episodes that emerge from long-term moralization processes can be enhanced by shifting the focus of moral panic research towards the work of Norbert Elias. I do not argue that we should develop a strictly ‘Eliasian’ approach to moral panic at the expense of all the other very important work that has been undertaken in this field (most recently, focusing on the work of Foucault, governmentality and moral regulation). Rather, I highlight how Elias’s work is of great value to emerging and more traditional moral panic research.

It is surprising that the work of Norbert Elias has been little mentioned in the same context as moral panic; the ‘figurational approach’ of Elias and, in particular, the concepts of *civilizing processes*, *decivilizing processes*, and *civilizing offensives*, have much in common with moral panic analyses, albeit there are fundamental differences. The first effort to link Elias and moral panic traces to the 1980s with Eric Dunning et al.’s work on football hooliganism¹. However, this early work did not attempt to develop a synthesis of Elias and moral panic; rather, these figurational studies on football hooliganism merely mentioned moral panic in passing, referring to the media’s amplification of incidences of football hooliganism and the perceived inappropriate reaction by policy makers.

We can find shadows of Elias in recent work on moral panic, which draws upon Alan Hunt’s work on moral regulation (Hunt 1999). While largely rejecting the concept of moral panic, Hunt utilizes both Elias and Foucault to explore historical projects of moral regulation (campaigns that others might classify as moral panics). In his analysis, Hunt explores how moral regulatory projects work to both govern others and the self. Sean Hier has since taken up Hunt’s analysis and applied it to moral panics, arguing that moral panics are volatile episodes that emerge from everyday regulatory projects, where the focus shifts from ethical self governance to the governance of ‘dangerous’ others (Hier, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2008). Chas Critcher (2008, 2009) has also joined the debate, albeit with some disagreement as to the extent to which we can apply the concept of moral regulation to moral panic.

The chapter focuses on utilizing Elias’s concepts of civilizing processes, decivilizing processes, and civilizing offensives, in combination with the figurational approach to research, to facilitate several shifts in the focus for moral panic research. Elias’s approach to research, along with the concepts he developed, enables us to explore panics in relation to long-term and short-term processes and to explore the contradictory,

countervailing processes that occur before, during and after panics. This is important because previous moral panic studies, bar a few exceptions, have tended to focus on what happens *during* a panic, and the *impact* a panic may have, while neglecting the *antecedents* to the panic (see Critcher 2003: 26; Rohloff and Wright 2010).

I begin by providing a brief overview of Elias's theory of civilizing and decivilizing processes, before critically discussing the possibility of conceptualizing moral panics as decivilizing processes. In response to the limitations of a narrow conceptualization of moral panics as decivilizing processes (which, I argue, can only be applied to *some* 'classical' moral panic cases), I discuss a dialectical understanding of (de)civilization. Here, I introduce the concept of civilizing offensive, which may involve a fusion of both civilizing and decivilizing trends, as a useful conceptual tool to move beyond a normative dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' moral panic, and instead to further explore the complex, paradoxical, ambivalent processes that may occur before, during and after moral panics. I then compare Elias's 'figurational approach' to moral panic research, not only fleshing out some of the commonalities between the areas of research, but also highlighting what a figurational approach can add to moral panic research. Specifically, I argue that the concept of 'involvement-detachment' and of 'secondary involvement' facilitate establishing a mode of research that does not entail a normative, debunking *presupposition* that the reaction (or panic) is inappropriate (although research can still be informative in this regard, as will be discussed later). Elias's approach to research focuses on historical and comparative research; applying his ideas to moral panic research encourages us to comparatively explore empirical examples that do not fit the 'classic' model of a moral panic, which forces us to question many of the assumptions about moral panic, including the normative *presupposition*. I conclude by using the example of climate change to illustrate several points made throughout the chapter, including how moral panics can be conceived as both civilizing and decivilizing processes (considering both long-term and short-term processes), and how moral panics can be conceived as civilizing offensives – attempts to 'civilize' the 'self' and/or the 'other' – in a time of perceived crisis.

CIVILIZING PROCESSES

In *The Civilizing Process* (2000), Elias explored 'civilization' in two very different ways. Firstly, he explored the development of the *normative* concept of 'civilization': the process whereby one group of people come to see themselves as more 'civilized' than another group of people, thereby enabling these self-identified 'civilized' people to commit acts that at other times would be seen as 'uncivilized' (indeed, the first part of his book is devoted to the 'sociogenesis', or development, of the normative concepts of 'civilization' and 'culture' in everyday language). While Elias did not want to use the term 'civilizing process' to refer to *progress*, he did seek to understand how the concept of 'civilization' in its everyday usage had attained these connotations of 'progress' and 'self-betterment' (as opposed to the 'uncivilized', and the 'barbaric').²

In contrast to the normative, everyday understanding of 'civilization', Elias sought to develop a second, more technical and sociological understanding of 'civilization'. In his examination of Western Europe from the Middle Ages, Elias developed his 'central theory' (Quilley and Loyal 2005) of civilizing processes by

empirically exploring the interrelationship between long-term changes in standards of behaviour and long-term changes in state-formation and other wider processes.

Following on from the first part of *The Civilizing Process*, ‘On the sociogenesis of the concepts of “civilization” and “culture”’, Elias explored how the development of the concept of ‘civility’ played out in notions of what constituted ‘civilized’ behaviour. He explored these changes in standards of behaviour by analysing etiquette books and other documents, beginning with Erasmus’s 1530 publication, ‘On Civility in Boys’. Throughout his analysis of these etiquette books, Elias traced an overall pattern of gradual changes in standards of behaviour relating to everyday interactions (e.g., behaviour at the table, blowing one’s nose, toileting practices). These books illustrated, for Elias, behaviour that was deemed to be acceptable, or ‘civilized’, as well as behaviour that was seen as unacceptable, or ‘uncivilized’. Elias observed that, over time, certain behaviours that were seen to be more ‘animalistic’ (such as bodily functions) came to be associated with shame and disgust and were increasingly ‘shifted behind the scenes’. At the same time, the regulation of these and other behaviours came increasingly to be regulated by self-control rather than external force. This is what Elias calls the social constraint towards self-constraint.

In relation to state-formation and other wider social processes, Elias traces how competition between various groups of people, with associated conflict between these groups, culminated in the establishment of a monopoly of one group and the eventual formation of a state. This process of state-formation brought with it changes in the way people were connected with one another, leading eventually to greater integration and greater interdependence between people, which brings with it changes in relations between them. As Elias puts it, as people become more reliant upon one another via increasing differentiation and increasing interdependence,

...more and more people must attune their conduct to that of others, the web of actions must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if each individual action is to fulfill its social functions. Individuals are compelled to regulate their conduct in an increasingly differentiated, more even and more stable manner (Elias 2000: 367).

This process, Elias argued, is in part dependent upon a gradual stabilization of a central state authority, with an associated state monopolization over the forces of violence and taxation. These processes, Elias argued, contribute towards a notion of stability, where dangers come to be perceived as fewer and, when they occur, as more predictable (that is, where dangers are known, and so life becomes less uncertain). Elias offers the example of ‘When a monopoly of force is formed, pacified social spaces are created which are normally free from violence’ (Elias 2000: 369). When violence does occur, it is often either hidden ‘behind the scenes’ or legitimated in some way by the state.

To summarize, Elias’s theory of civilizing processes holds that, as a central state authority grows and gains increasing monopolization over the control of violence and taxation, people come to be increasingly integrated and interdependent with one another. These changes in wider social processes exert pressures towards changes in behaviour, compelling people towards increasing foresight, mutual identification and increased self-restraint, thus contributing to more even, stable behaviours and relations between people.

In later works, Elias examined how these changes were intertwined with gradual changes in modes of knowledge, from ‘magico-mythical’ knowledge towards increasingly ‘reality-congruent’ knowledge³ (Elias 2007).

Decivilizing processes

It is important to note that Elias did not regard his theory of civilizing processes as unilinear or inevitable; it was neither a theory of ‘progress’ nor a proclamation of the superiority of Western ‘civilization’ (Kilminster & Mennell, 2008, p. xiii). Indeed, Elias observed that the process of civilization is ‘in a continuous conflict with countervailing decivilising processes. There is no basis for assuming that it must remain dominant’ (Elias 2008:4).

Building on Elias’s work, Stephen Mennell has developed some ‘possible symptoms of decivilizing.’ Put simply, ‘Decivilizing processes are what happens when civilizing processes go into reverse’ (Mennell 1990: 205) (see also Fletcher 1997). One of the potential ‘reversals’ that Mennell elaborates on is ‘a rise in the level of danger and a fall in its calculability’ (Mennell 1990: 215). As Elias argued,

The armour of civilized conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as it once was. Corresponding fears would soon burst the limits set to them today (Elias 2000: 532).

In other words, as danger becomes increasingly incalculable, so too people’s behaviour changes accordingly—it is perhaps more conducive for your survival if, where there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding potential danger, you tend to err on the side of caution in relations with the ‘social’ and the ‘natural’ world (for example, the ‘fight or flight’ response).

Stephen Mennell observes that there often exists the perception today that we are living in a more violent world. He refers to Geoffrey Pearson’s historical study that illustrates the periodic commonality of such ‘fears of escalating violence, moral decline, and the destruction of “the British way of life”’ (Mennell 1990: 214). Here, Mennell critiques the idea that this qualifies as a decivilizing process, stressing that an *actual* increase in violence may not necessarily be occurring (aside from periodic short-term increases). But perhaps merely the *perception* of an increase in violence may affect the development of other decivilizing trends, as may be the case with some moral panics.

Another possible symptom of decivilizing processes that Mennell suggests relates to ‘changes in modes of knowledge’:

During times of social crisis – military defeats, political revolutions, rampant inflation, soaring unemployment, separately or in combination – fears rise because control of social events has declined. Rising fears make it still more difficult to control events. That makes people still more susceptible to wish fantasies about means of alleviating the situation (Mennell 1990: 216).

In other words, there occurs a shift back from ‘reality congruent’ to increasingly ‘magico-mythical’ knowledge.

These changes may then potentially coincide with changes in behaviour, where certain acts that were formerly seen as ‘uncivilized’ or ‘barbaric’ become increasingly more acceptable, where there may occur a shift away from violence ‘behind the scenes’ back to the reemergence of violence in the public sphere, where mutual identification between people (or particular groups of people) decreases (Mennell 1990). A classic example of this is Elias’s own study of Nazi Germany (Elias 1996). Although, as Mennell observes, these decivilizing trends were only partial reversals: the extermination of the Jews still had to be kept ‘behind the scenes’ to a certain extent, suggesting that there was still a degree of mutual identification with the Jews (Mennell 1990).

Moral panics as decivilizing processes?

As already mentioned, decivilizing processes may occur where there is a weakening of the state, for example, in the aftermath of social or natural crises. However, with moral panics, there need not be an *actual* weakening, only a *perceived* weakening. This could include the perception that governmental regulations, and the enforcement of those regulations, are failing to control a particular perceived problem; or, conversely, that individuals are failing to regulate their own behaviour and therefore there is a need for a stronger external force (from either within or outside ‘the state’⁴) to ‘control’ these ‘uncontrollable’ deviants.

A further indicator of decivilizing processes is the increase in the level of danger posed, as well as an increasing incalculability of danger; that is, where danger becomes more prominent and increasingly difficult to predict. In the case of moral panics, it could be argued that the ‘exaggeration and distortion’ of reporting on phenomena (reporting of both past events and potential future risks) have contributed to a sense that we now live in an increasingly dangerous society, where the occurrence of dangers is perceived to be difficult to predict.

In addition to Mennell’s symptoms of decivilizing, Jonathan Fletcher (1997: 83) has proposed three main criteria for decivilizing processes: (1) a shift from self-restraint to social constraint (i.e. governance of the other, rather than self-governance); (2) a shift towards ‘less even’, ‘less stable’ patterns of behaviour (i.e. where people’s behaviour fluctuates in different situations and with different people, to the point where people’s behaviour, and responses to others, becomes increasingly unpredictable); and (3) ‘a contraction in the scope of mutual identification’, where people come to identify and empathise with an increasingly smaller group of people. Fletcher goes on to say that these three main criteria ‘would be likely to occur in societies in which there was a decrease in the (state) control of the monopoly of violence, a fragmentation of social ties and a shortening of chains of commercial, emotional and cognitive interdependence’ (Fletcher 1997: 84). He further adds that these societies would likely be characteristic of Mennell’s symptoms of decivilizing (as outlined above).

Rather than regarding moral panics as a *complete* decivilizing process, we can see how perceived increase in danger, and/or perceived failure of central state authority to protect its citizens from perceived dangers, may be enough to bring about *partial* decivilizing processes, similar to those outlined above. If a particular issue (danger or

threat) becomes highlighted and mass communicated (for example, via the media), fears may increase and danger may come to be perceived as increasingly incalculable with regard to the given issue. In turn, 'folk devils' may be created. During this process, folk devils may come to be increasingly dehumanized and come to be seen as the dangerous 'uncivilized' other, thereby enabling the use of more 'cruel' measures that would, under other conditions, be deemed 'uncivilized'. In the haste to address the given issue, solutions may be proposed that are not necessarily well informed, and may not function adequately to address the given issue; indeed, they may have the unintended consequence of contributing to the problem. In addition, in attempts to alleviate the perceived problem, the state, or even citizens themselves, may draw upon more violent, 'uncivilized' measures in an attempt to try and contain the problem; for example, the development of new laws that may override certain civil liberties, or the development of vigilantism (Rohloff 2008).

However, while the above may apply to *some* cases that have been classified as moral panics, I wish to argue that it is not simply the case that all moral panics are merely decivilizing processes. Indeed, as Elias himself would no doubt have argued, civilizing and decivilizing processes (and thereby, moral panics), are much more complex than this. Potentially, civilizing processes may contribute to the emergence of moral panics, and moral panics may, in turn, feed back into civilizing processes. It is here that we need a shift in the focus of moral panic research in order to attend to the complexity of moral panics.

CIVILIZING OFFENSIVES: TOWARDS A DIALECTICAL UNDERSTANDING OF (DE)CIVILIZATION

In his discussion of the complexity of civilizing and decivilizing processes, Robert van Krieken (1998, 1999) draws upon the concept of 'civilizing offensives' (a concept derived from the work of Elias; see Mitzman 1987). Civilizing offensives have been defined as 'deliberate (but not necessarily successful) attempts by people who consider themselves to be "civilized" to "improve" the manners and morals of people whom they considered to be "less civilized" or "barbaric"' (Dunning and Sheard 2005: 280). In this way, 'civilizing offensives' bear a strong resemblance to those moral regulation campaigns that are analyzed by Alan Hunt in *Governing Morals* (Hunt 1999), which, in turn, bear some resemblances to what others have termed 'moral panics' (as well as processes that Howard Becker (1991) earlier termed 'moral crusades' by 'moral entrepreneurs').

Robert van Krieken argues 'for a more *dialectical* understanding of social relations and historical development, one which grasps the often contradictory character of social life' (van Krieken 1998:132). Here, van Krieken is arguing that processes of civilization themselves can give rise to decivilizing trends in the form of 'civilized barbarism'. To illustrate this point, he draws upon the example of the 'stolen generations' in Australia. In their project to 'civilize' indigenous Australian children, Europeans forcibly removed the aboriginal children from their homes and families in an attempt to make the aboriginal children more like European children (i.e., to 'civilize' them). This project took the form of a 'civilizing offensive', and was carried out in the name of civilization. Civilizing processes were present, with the exception that mutual

identification was limited between Europeans and the indigenous population. However, there was still a degree of mutual identification; the ‘stolen generations’ were integrated amongst the Europeans, rather than obliterated (although other aborigines were killed), and it is important to highlight that this civilizing offensive was carried out in philanthropic terms as an attempt to *improve* (as they saw it) the lives of the aboriginals (van Krieken 1999).

Therefore, while ‘civilizing offensives’ can be compared with projects of moral regulation (and, by extension, episodes of moral panic), they may involve within them a *fusion* of civilizing and decivilizing trends. If we combine this idea of a civilizing offensive involving a fusion of civilizing and decivilizing trends, and then apply it to the concept of moral panic, we can use this to develop a more encompassing concept of moral panic, one that takes account of the complex (civilizing and decivilizing) processes that intertwine before, during and after a moral panic, thereby overcoming the dichotomous, normative conceptualization of moral panics as being *either* ‘bad’ *or* ‘good’ panics.⁵ One potential way to overcome this normative dichotomy is by integrating some of the aspects of figurational research with moral panic research.

MORAL PANIC AND FIGURATIONAL RESEARCH

A figurational (or process) approach to research is derived from Elias’s own approach to research, most explicitly outlined in *What is Sociology?* (Elias 1978), as well as numerous articles and other publications (for example, see Elias 1956, 1987). Rather than giving an exposition about a figurational approach⁶, I flesh out some of the core assumptions of the approach by comparing figurational research with moral panic research.

Commonalities

There are already many commonalities between figurational research and the concept of moral panic. Both moral panic and figurational research are *processual*, in that they both seek to ask questions about the processes by which something has come to pass. For example, Elias explored how some people came to see themselves as more ‘civilized’ than others (Elias 2000). With moral panic research, a ‘processual model’ (Cricher 2003) is used to explore how a particular reaction to a perceived social problem has developed.

The figurational approach and moral panic research also focus on *relations*. The foundations of moral panic within symbolic interactionism and labeling theory have ingrained the concept with a focus on relations between people, including *changing* power relations between the ‘control culture’ and the ‘folk devils’ (Ben-Yehuda 2009). Epistemologically, moral panic research sees ‘social reality’ as constantly in flux – continually contested and forever changing as relations between people change. This is similar to how Elias conceptualizes ‘social reality’. Elias was very critical of the notion that one could discover eternal laws about social relations – static laws that are similar to those in the physical sciences. Thinking in terms of *processes*, *relations*, and *development*, Elias did not regard the ‘nature’ of ‘social reality’ as static and unchanging; rather he saw it as a continual process of development, resultant from the complex

interactions between interdependent players (be they humans, other animals, etc.) (for example, see Elias 1978).

As we have already seen, via the concepts of civilizing processes, decivilizing processes, and civilizing offensives, moral panic and figurational research also share an interest in exploring changes in the regulation of behaviour – both regulation of the self and regulation of the other. However, there are several existing points of departure. Rather than viewing these differences in research approaches as problems, I now wish to discuss how these points of departure can be utilised to further develop moral panic research and to attend to some of the recent criticisms and debates surrounding moral panic.

Points of Departure: Involvement, Detachment and the ‘Political Project’

An important inclusion that figurational research can bring to moral panic research is via the concept of ‘involvement-detachment’. Recent debates in the moral panic literature have discussed normativity and the ‘political project’ of moral panic research. On the one hand, the concept of moral panic, as first developed by Stan Cohen, Jock Young, and others, entailed within it several assumptions about the purpose and focus of moral panic research⁷. As Cohen himself observes:

It is obviously true that the uses of the [moral panic] concept to expose disproportionality and exaggeration have come from within a left liberal consensus. The empirical project is concentrated on (if not reserved for) cases where the moral outrage appears driven by conservative or reactionary forces...the point [of moral panic research] was to expose social reaction not just as over-reaction in some quantitative sense, but first, as *tendentious* (that is, slanted in a particular ideological direction) and second, as *misplaced* or *displaced* (that is, aimed – whether deliberately or thoughtlessly – at a target which was not the ‘real’ problem) (Cohen 2002: xxxi).

There thus exists an assumption (or presupposition) that, with moral panic research, the reaction to a perceived social problem under investigation is somehow inappropriate and, therefore, wrong. To be sure, some moral panic studies have consisted of analyses of reactions to *imagined* social problems (for example, ‘satanic ritual abuse’). However, to have a concept, and a mode of research, that carries with it a debunking presupposition is limited in what it may achieve.

In response to the problem of normativity, as well as other problems, several authors have either rejected the concept altogether, or have begun to develop a reconceptualization that attempts to overcome this normative assumption (and other limitations) (Hier 2008). However, the attempt to remove the ‘political’ aspect of moral panic, informed in part by Foucault, has come with some criticism from others (see Critcher 2008, 2009). It seems that there exists a tension between those who want the concept to retain its political project and those who want to develop a more detached approach to moral panic research.

One way to overcome this apparent divide is through the application of the figurational concept of ‘involvement-detachment’ (Elias 2007). Elias was very critical of

the intrusion of 'heteronomous valuations' into research, and endeavoured to develop sociology into a relatively autonomous 'science' (Elias 1978). Normative ideological intrusions, such as those outlined earlier, could be construed as a type of heteronomous valuation where the researcher's identification with a particular group (in this case, the 'deviants'), combined with a political project to 'liberate' the particular group, may influence the degree to which the researcher can step back and see the development of, in this case, a 'moral panic', as being more than a short-term irrational aberration.

This does not mean that Elias advocated a 'value neutral' sociology, which he would have regarded as an impossible and undesirable task. One can never be completely involved or completely detached. Sociology consists of the study of relations between interdependent people and a degree of involvement was desirable in order to aid our understanding of human relations. While an initial 'involvement' in something may spark interest to investigate that particular topic, Elias argued that this initial involvement should be accompanied by an attempt at 'stepping back' through a 'detour via detachment'. The idea being that one can contribute to a more 'reality congruent' knowledge if one is not too constrained by the short-term aim of achieving some political goal (Elias 1978, 2007). If we then apply this to moral panic research, it would mean that when undertaking a 'moral panic study', we would endeavour not to have a prior judgment about what we might find (in terms of the 'appropriateness' of reactions to perceived social problems), nor would it involve any overtly political aim; if a 'political project' were to occur, it would come *after* the research, with the intention of lessening one's own biases intruding upon the research (Rohloff and Wright 2010). In this way, the concept of 'involvement-detachment', while at first glance appears to be incompatible with moral panic research, may indeed be one way to further develop the concept of moral panic and overcome the normative divide.

The problem of a normative *presupposition*

While there is nothing wrong with some moral panic research leading to the debunking of claims, it should not be imbued within the concept as a fixed criterion. Otherwise, one runs the risk of having the concept of moral panic determining what the researcher will find. The concept then becomes useless, as it can then only be applied *following* research, rather than used as a guiding principle; it also limits the applicability of the concept. As an illustrative example of this normative presupposition, I recently received reviewers' comments on a manuscript that I had under consideration. The article was on climate change, moral panic and civilization. Despite the fact that I clearly outlined in my paper that I was reconceptualizing moral panic, and was not using it in a debunking capacity, the normative debunking connotations associated with 'moral panic' were ever present in the reviewer's mind, leading them to call me a 'climate change skeptic' and calling my paper a piece of 'climate change denial'. While some may disagree with my application of moral panic to climate change (for various reasons), these comments served to illustrate for me that the concept of moral panic is highly imbued with connotations of irrationality and debunking *at the outset*. Therefore, this reaffirms the necessity for a shift in focus in moral panic research towards an approach that does not entail such a normative presupposition (while still retaining the potential for a 'critical',

informative reflection post-analysis), including examination of issues that do not fit the 'classic' moral panic model.

Dichotomous Thinking

An additional way that figurational research differs from much moral panic research is in its attempts to move beyond dichotomous thinking. Another recent debate within moral panic literature has been concerned with the issue of moral panic versus risk society, or moralized social problems versus concerns over 'natural' issues (such as health, the environment). Some authors have argued that 'moral' is somehow seen as a separate sphere. For example, Kenneth Thompson argues, 'Sometimes panics about food (e.g., the BSE scare about infected beef) or health have been confused with panics that relate directly to morals' (Thompson 1998: vii). Such arguments seem to suggest that 'panics about food' cannot contain a moral element (a view echoed by Cohen and Critcher); it is a question of moral panics *versus* risk panics (Ungar 2001). However, others such as Hunt and Hier, disagree, arguing that risks can be *moralized* and that moral panics themselves involve risk discourses. A question for exploration could be why are some moral panic researchers so intent on limiting the applicability of the concept? Can this perhaps tell us something about the *function* of the concept for sociologist, and the *motivations* behind (some) moral panic research? Perhaps a further shift in focus could be on the sociology of the sociology of moral panic?

Short-Term Campaigns and Long-Term Processes

One way that moral panic research and figurational research can further develop one another is via a fusion of the two. As it currently stands, moral panic research tends to focus on short-term processes, to the relative neglect of how long-term processes relate to short-term episodes of moral panics (Rohloff and Wright 2010)⁸. When the time-frame for research is extended, it is often on the *aftermath* of the panic, not on the antecedents that fed into the panic (Critcher 2003). A focus on the short-term also implies a sort of 'epistemic rupture' that constitutes a revolutionary change in the way (some) people may perceive a particular social problem. In some instances, this short-term focus has also placed greater emphasis on the intentional actions of crusading reformers, to the relative neglect of more long-term unplanned developments that may influence the development of a moral panic.

Conversely, figurational research has been criticized for its relative neglect of deliberate intentional campaigns, such as civilizing offensives. Such a criticism may perhaps be unjust, for Elias conceptualized social development as being a *combination* of intended and unintended developments:

...the interweaving of the planned acts of many people results in the development of the social units which they form with each other, unplanned by any of the people who brought them about. But the people who are thus bonded to each other constantly act intentionally, and purposefully from within the course of developments which they have not planned, and with results that feed back into

the unplanned course of development...a dialectical movement between intentional and unintentional social changes (Elias 1998: 204).

Nevertheless, the concept of civilizing offensives has received comparatively less attention than that of more long-term unplanned developments associated with civilizing (and decivilizing) processes (Dunning and Sheard 2005: 280). Yet, within a figurational approach, conceptually there exists the possibility to explore the relation between short-term intentional campaigns and more long-term wider social processes – moral panic research may be one way to pursue such an exploration.

MORAL PANICS AS CIVILIZING AND DECIVILIZING PROCESSES: BEYOND THE NORMATIVE DIVIDE

What, then, would a figurational approach to moral panic research look like? And how can moral panics be conceptualized as *both* civilizing *and* decivilizing processes and what would such a conceptualization mean?

A figurational approach to moral panic research might involve exploring the interplay between long-term regulatory processes (moral regulation, or civilizing and decivilizing processes) and short-term campaigns (moral panics). This could involve the study of how various processes have been gradually developing in the long-term, including changes in standards of behaviour, changes in the communication of knowledge, changes in state-formation, changes in social and self-regulation, changing power relations between people. This could then be combined with an exploration of various short-term campaigns (instances of moral panics), and how these short-term campaigns relate to the more gradual wider social processes. Such a focus on long-term developmental research could then provide us with a greater insight into the complex, dialectical processes that develop in relation to moral panics.

As an example, consider the topic of climate change. There has already been some figurational research that has argued that the development of ecological sensibilities could be seen as a type of civilizing process (Quilley 2009; Schmidt 1993). Moral panic research has also been undertaken on the topic of global warming, where, it is argued that global warming campaigns constitute ‘social scares’ (a concept derived from moral panics) (Ungar 1992, 1995). One could also argue, perhaps, that certain outcomes of processes of civilization have given rise to decivilizing consequences, in the form of *excess* capitalism and *over*consumption, to the relative detriment of the environment and social life as a whole (see also Ampudia de Haro 2008). Potentially, campaigns surrounding climate change could be utilized as civilizing offensives, or moral panics, to bring about a civilizing ‘spurt’. However, these campaigns could also, potentially, bring with them decivilizing disintegrative processes; for example, via the development of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviours into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ people (this is already happening, to a certain extent, with some animal rights and environmental activists who prioritize animal/environmental rights over the rights of ‘other un-eco-friendly’ people; where increasing mutual identification with other animals and the environment, goes hand-in-hand with decreasing mutual identification with other people) (for example, see Quilley 2009: 133). So, potentially, moral panics over climate change could be regarded as both civilizing and decivilizing processes.

Moral panics are highly complex processes. To further tap into the complexity of moral panics, it is necessary to abandon some of the former dichotomous thinking regarding moral panics, as it limits our perception about what moral panics might be and what they might entail. Such dichotomies include: moral/risk, rational/irrational, 'good'/'bad', and civilizing/decivilizing. Through collapsing these dichotomies, and expanding the scope of moral panic research to other types of examples, as well as longer time frames of analysis, we can gain a greater insight into how moral panics develop and how they relate to more long-term processes.

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NOTES

¹ For example, see: Dunning, Murphy & Williams (1986, 1988); Dunning & Sheard (2005); Murphy, Dunning & Williams (1988); Murphy, Williams & Dunning (1990).

² For introductions to Elias's work, see: Dunning & Hughes (forthcoming); Fletcher (1997); Hughes (2008); Kilminster (2007); Mennell (1998); van Krieken (1998, 2003).

³ It is important to highlight that this shift from 'magico-mythical' to 'reality-congruent' knowledge, like other processual shifts that Elias traces, is never absolute.

⁴ This could either come from 'official' authorities, such as those of 'the state', or non-state groups, such as social movement or reform groups, vigilante groups, 'terrorist' groups, etc.

⁵ On the idea of 'good' and 'bad' panics, see Cohen (2002, pp. xxxi-xxxv)

⁶ For introductions to a figurational approach, see: Bloyce (2004); Maguire (1988); Murphy and Waddington (2000). On discussions of method and 'methodology' in Elias's work, see Dunning & Hughes (forthcoming).

⁷ For further discussion of the sociology of the sociology of moral panic, see Garland (2008) and Rohloff & Wright (2010).

⁸ Although some authors, such as Hunt, Hier, and now Critcher, are beginning to address this neglect of the relationship between short-term campaigns and long-term processes via a fusion, of sorts, of moral panic with moral regulation; exploring the relationship between short-term regulatory episodes (i.e. panics) and more long-term projects of moral regulation.