

# The evil that women and

**T**HE popular press often focuses on crimes involving children – whether as victims or perpetrators.

In recent years coverage has frequently reached ‘moral panic’ proportions in the UK, with perpetrators of crimes being labelled as monstrous and irredeemably evil. But crimes involving children are actually relatively rare. Can a psychological perspective help us to understand why such cases continue to attract such high levels of interest and emotion?

I will draw in particular on two areas of psychological literature: theories of



**MEG BARKER** *considers news depictions of children as victims and perpetrators of ‘evil’ acts.*

representations of evil, and the feminist psychological research on women and crime. Is our reaction to so-called evil acts tainted by the popular notion of childhood as a time of innocence?

#### Children as victims

The media emphasise cases of child abduction, sexual abuse and murder by strangers. It sells. Nowhere is this clearer than in the moral panic in the British press over paedophiles in the community, headed by the *News of the World* in 2000. This represented children as in constant danger from ‘evil perverts who prey on them’ and the subsequent name-and-shame campaign led to a series of marches and vigilante

attacks. The conviction of Roy Whiting for the murder of Sarah Payne reignited the debate. The *News of the World* stepped up its campaign again in August this year after the discovery of the bodies of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, providing its readers with another list of the locations of the ‘monsters in our midst’.

The quantity of press coverage of stranger paedophiles (and murderers) seriously misrepresents the reality of the situation. Child deaths in general are far more rare than the media lead us to believe. Peelo *et al.* (2002) report that the news coverage of homicide victims is a mirror image of the reality of the situation. The least common age of homicide victims is 10.

## WEBLINKS

Online resource for exploring perspectives on evil and human wickedness: [www.wickedness.net](http://www.wickedness.net)

NSPCC: [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

TMR Network Project: Nature and Prevention of Bullying project: [www.gold.ac.uk/tmr](http://www.gold.ac.uk/tmr)

# men, children do

However, two thirds of homicides of 10-year-olds are reported, whereas reporting rates are much lower for higher-risk groups like babies and young adults. Strangers kill fewer than 10 children a year in the UK. Abusers are far more frequently people known to children: 80 per cent of physical abusers are parents (Harrower, 1998), and the vast majority of sexual abuse is by people children see as 'boyfriends/girlfriends', acquaintances or 'friends' (NSPCC, 2001).

By far the most common type of harmful aggression experienced by children is school bullying. This has been found to have long-term negative effects on victims, leading to at least 16 deaths a year in the UK through suicide (Marr & Field, 2001). Despite this, there is still a common attitude that bullying is a normal and even character-building part of growing up (Eslea & Smith, 2000), and tabloid newspaper editions devoted to its elimination are far less common than those relating to paedophiles.

One theory that may help us to understand the preoccupation with this rare 'stranger danger' over the more common risks is Baumeister's (1996) 'myth of pure evil'. This refers to the prevalent, compelling image of evil in our society that depicts perpetrators as sadistic, chaotic 'others', whilst 'we' are the good guys or the innocent victims. Baumeister argues that this way of constructing evil is pervasive because it satisfies several important human needs. It provides us with certainty, reassurance about our own goodness, and often a scapegoat on which to blame the unpleasant side of human nature.

Perpetuating the myth that 'only perverted old men called paedophiles sexually abuse children and that these individuals are easily recognisable' (Harrower, 1998, p.125) detracts from the fact that much abuse is perpetrated by those known to children. Labelling a group of strangers as 'monsters', and getting them 'put away for life' is a way of

avoiding the existence of the problem within our own homes, schools and communities. A major problem with this is that it leads to child sexual abuse at the hands of known people being hushed up or even disbelieved – surely only an evil and predatory stranger could commit such a heinous act? Very few children report abuse to the police, and a third never tell anybody about it (NSPCC, 2001). Feminist researchers find similar overrepresentation of stranger attacks on women, and suggest this is also to do with unease or avoidance concerning the frequent abuse of women within the home.

## Children as perpetrators

Since the murder of two-year-old James Bulger in 1993, the childhood faces of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables have often featured in the tabloids alongside taglines such as 'freaks of nature' and 'products of the devil'. Mobs outside the courts during their case hurled stones and screamed for revenge. The names

Thompson and Venables still hit the headlines whenever there are rumours as to their whereabouts or well-being. The case has led to debate about whether children themselves can be evil.

Cases like this are actually extremely rare. Over the last two and a half centuries in Britain there have been only 31 recorded cases of people under the age of 14 killing (Sereny, 1995). By far the most common perpetrators of violent crime are adult males, who commit 84 per cent of all offences in the UK, and make up 96 per cent of the prison population (Home Office, 1996).

Young (1996) examined the reporting of the Bulger case, and highlighted the way in which 'good, innocent' childhood was set against the aberration of the killers. She reports that parents were anxious that their children might be in James Bulger's shoes, but not that they might be like Thompson or Venables. This fits into the myth of pure evil where people identify with the 'good' and against the 'evil'.

The representation of child killers can also be compared to that of female killers. The feminist psychological literature states

that women criminals are often seen as 'doubly deviant, doubly damned' (Heidensohn, 1996), because they have transgressed both societal laws of criminal behaviour and cultural norms concerning femininity (such as non-violence and passivity). It may well be that the same applies to children: child killers transgress both the law and the cultural norms of childhood (natural goodness and innocence) and are therefore seen as doubly deviant.

It seems that for both women and children we have only two social constructions available: innocence and evil. It is hard to see a child or woman as being somewhere in the middle. Child killers are labelled as 'bad seeds', because it is not acceptable that something more complex is going on to put a child in a situation where they want to kill. If these children are just 'freaks of nature', society does not have to accept any responsibility or properly examine the situations that could lead children to such extreme responses as murder, self-harm or suicide.

Crimes by adult men do not lead to debates over the 'nature and essence of

masculinity' in the same way that crimes by children or women result in questions about childhood or femininity. Arguably, the exact opposite should be the case. We should focus on the more common problem of adult male crime, and the construction of masculinity in our culture, which many propose encourages these disproportionate levels of male violence.

#### Children as innocent

The news representations of child killers are mirrored in the way that children who commit crimes have been portrayed in fiction. For example, in the 1978 film *Halloween* Donald Pleasance describes how he tried to keep the child killer Michael Myers locked up because 'what was living behind that boy's eyes was purely and simply evil'.

Two further fictional examples highlight the difficulty people have with the concept of a child who kills. In his book about the campaign to ban horror comics in Britain, Barker (1984) examines a story called 'The Orphan' in which a 10-year-old girl kills her father in a scheme to get her mother and her mother's lover executed.

### We seem to be particularly shocked and intrigued by the concept of evil children

Barker states that this strip became 'in the eyes of British and US campaigners, a kind of embodiment of consummate evil' (p.91).

The shocked and angry reaction to this comic over others in the genre seems likely to be due to the portrayal of a child as a manipulative, calculating killer. Similarly, an episode of the TV crime programme *Taggart* ('Death comes softly') capitalises on the fact that people won't suspect that it is two young girls (present at most of the crime scenes) who have been killing elderly people. We seem to be particularly shocked and intrigued by the concept of evil children, which probably explains why the news media find stories about child criminals to be such an effective tactic.

The popular idea that children are naturally innocent and good seems to be partly responsible for this preoccupation with child crime, and the notion that any children who do commit crimes are aberrations or freaks of nature. We can see that this idea is a social construction when we examine historical depictions. In the 16th century children were perceived as being 'born evil', and needing to be trained or forced to be good (Houlbrooke, 1984).

An article in *The Guardian* (Hattenstone, 2000) also highlights the culturally constructed nature of childhood goodness or evilness. It describes a case in Norway in 1994 where two six-year-old boys beat a five-year-old girl to death. The boys were treated as 'victims of their own violence', not killers. They were not named, and they returned to school within two weeks accompanied by a psychologist. The girl's mother has forgiven the boys, feels that they have been punished enough by what they did, and was astonished when a journalist asked her whether she hated them.

Hattenstone speculates about the reasons for the differences between the Norwegian case and the case of Thompson

and Venables in the UK. He argues that the small, close Norwegian community was important in reintegrating the children, and also highlights cultural differences between the countries. These differences are reflected in their legal systems. The age of criminal responsibility in Norway is 15, compared with 10 in England (8 in Scotland), meaning that only people of this age and over can be tried in adult courts. This discrepancy perhaps points to a need for legal consideration of the psychological evidence on understanding of morality and permanence of death in children, particularly those with disturbed upbringings.

In the *Guardian* article, the psychologist who worked with the Norwegian boys argues that punishment of child criminals for something they cannot undo traumatises them further and exorcises them from their environment. This can lead to them 'splitting' and imagining that they did not really commit the crime, in order to protect themselves, thus making their eventual rehabilitation extremely problematic.

It could be argued that the current UK perception of children as naturally innocent and good also prevents thorough exploration of the very real physical and emotional suffering inflicted by children on other children every day in the context of school bullying and other abuse. John Pearce, a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at Nottingham University, has said of Thompson and Venables: '[T]here is a much smaller difference between what these children did and what other children do than meets the eye. It would be wrong to assume that these children are evil.' (Young, 1996, p.115.) Yet when tabloid newspapers do pick up on the more common incidents of aggression, they often label bullies as evil just as they do with child killers (Sutton, 2001). Again this is unhelpful since it constructs bullies as something other than 'normal' children. Seeing such children as 'different' places the emphasis on them as individuals, rather than on bullying behaviour itself and the school cultures and other social environments that psychologists have found to be a vital component in bullying (Smith & Brain, 2000).

The psychological literature is not immune from demonising bullies and representing them as 'different' because they transgress cultural norms of behaviour. Undergraduate developmental psychology texts often imply that bullies have something wrong with them. For example, Seifert *et al.* (2000) refer to aggressive

school-age children as 'maladjusted' and suggest that temperamental differences from birth are responsible for aggression in middle childhood and adolescence. There is a tendency to focus on bullies and how they differ from 'normal' children, rather than exploring the context in which bullying occurs.

### Time to lose our innocence?

In conclusion, it seems that the popular representations of children in relation to evil are unhelpful – and even dangerous – when trying to decrease the risk of crime against them and when trying to deal with those few who commit crimes themselves. We need to question our unrealistic notion of childhood as a time of pure innocence, since, when this is violated, demonisation and lack of understanding tends to follow. Equally, the tendency to blame evil outsiders seems to result in a culture of privacy, which prevents us from being aware of abuse against children in our own homes, schools and neighbourhoods.

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