

**‘When the mobs are looking for witches to burn, nobody's safe’:  
Talking about the reactionary crowd**

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**Abstract**

Previous research has successfully problematized the pathologizing discourses used to discredit crowd events. However, examples of reactionary crowds can operate rhetorically as an obstacle to a liberatory account of the crowd in history. The present paper presents an analysis of newspaper accounts of a series of ‘anti-paedophile’ crowd actions which took place in Britain in the Summer of 2000. Such accounts characteristically pathologized the crowd not only through use of particular terms and concepts, but also through anecdotes which served as evidence of diminished rationality. The paper analyses the rhetorical and ideological functions of these and other constructions identified in the texts, including those offered by participants themselves. A way of talking about the (reactionary) crowd is offered which distinguishes particular crowd ideologies from collective processes per se and which therefore avoids condemning collective action in itself.

**Key words:** Crowds, mob rule, collective action, pathologization.

## Introduction

Crowd events and collective action in general have historically been the site of the construction of new discourses, identities and social relations (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000; Eyerman & Jamison, 1991; Jasper, 1997; Melucci, 1989). From a progressive liberal perspective, 'people power' has shaped the modern world (Ackerman & Kreugler, 1994). From a class-struggle perspective, the crowd is one of the forms through which the proletariat can liberate itself from its alienated condition. However, collectives, and crowds in particular, have historically been much maligned. A wealth of linguistic and conceptual resources has developed which has served to discredit and delegitimize the crowd.

The particular (negative) themes associated with accounts of the crowd include its inferior mentality, its uncritical susceptibility to the influence of demagogues, and, by virtue of its inherent atavism, the threat of the crowd or 'mob' to 'civilization'. In nineteenth century France, these notions became systematized and rationalized through the introduction to the study of crowd behaviour of a medical discourse (e.g., 'contagion', 'feverishness', 'delirium') by the historian Taine (McClelland, 1989). Following Taine and his popularizing contemporaries, such as Le Bon (1895), uncontrolled emotionality and reduced intelligence became dominant themes in subsequent accounts of crowd psychology (e.g., Zimbardo, 1970).

Studies have indicated a link between the types of explanation or language used to account for crowd events and the speaker's or writer's social location. Thus, historical research has shown that accounts of the inherent irrationality and atavism of the crowd reflected the ideology of the nineteenth century ruling class, which sought to discredit and undermine working class organization (Barrows, 1981; Nye, 1975; Reicher, 2000; Van Ginneken, 1985). In relation to more recent crowd events, studies of press accounts likewise point to an association between the political position of the commentator and the type of language used to describe crowd events (e.g., Fang, 1994; Trew, 1979): those critical of crowd participants' motives are more likely to

describe an event in negative terms (e.g., 'riot') rather than neutrally (e.g. 'demonstration') or positively (e.g. 'people power').

The delegitimizing functions of such negative language and explanations are obvious. If the crowd is pathologised and criminalized, then its behaviour is not meaningful. There can therefore be no rational dialogue with it. Since the crowd is not part of the democratic process, it is legitimate and even necessary to suppress it with the full force of the state.

For critical discourse analysis (CDA), the importance of sustaining the critique of such pathologizing accounts is equally obvious. For CDA, the starting point for research and analysis is an explicit recognition of our place as subjects within social relations of power and dominance, and our interest in challenging such relations through exposing the way they are discursively sustained (van Dijk, 1993). Paraphrasing Willig (1999: 2), the argument here is that, by unravelling and critiquing the constructed nature of accounts of crowd pathology, a space is created for alternative - liberatory - ways of talking and thinking about the crowd.

Studies of the St. Paul's 'riot' of 1980 (Potter & Reicher, 1987; Reicher & Potter, 1985) offer some illustration of this point. While journalists, police officers and other observers commenting on the St. Paul's events characterized the collectivity as inherently destructive, 'riot' participants themselves explained their own actions as a function of their antagonistic (meaningful) relationship with the police and authorities: rather than the 'riot' representing the self-destruction of the community, participants described their actions as an attempt to defend the community from (racist) oppression. The analysis thus suggested that while those on the outside (and in authority) reproduced the pathologizing themes and explanations of crowd theorists such as Le Bon and Taine, those actually involved in the crowd event itself offered accounts which made sense of the precise pattern of events in terms of their definition of identity (locality, 'freedom' and the antagonistic relationship with the police). Through problematizing dominant accounts as ideological (mystifying), the analysis

of the St. Paul's 'riot' threw into relief accounts which explained the events without pathologizing the crowd.

However, it might be argued that it was relatively easy to construe the St. Paul's crowd events positively since the 'riot' was against (racist) oppression. Rhetorically, a problem for arguments in support of the crowd is the phenomenon of the reactionary crowd. While positive social change can take place through the crowd, the crowd is by no means always a force for positive social change - as evidenced in the examples of the Nuremburg Rally, anti-black lynchings in the USA, anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia and the more recent collective attacks on refugee hostels in Rostock, Germany. Such examples might be used in argument (and hence in social policy) to justify positing the lone, atomized individual as the guarantor of rationality, in contrast to the psychological dangers of collectivity. If there are psychological dangers in collectivity itself, then the actions of *all* crowds can be pathologized, including those we may wish to support. In other words, we are back to the reifying discourses which have historically been used as a weapon against social change.

From a critical perspective, what we need, therefore, is a way of talking about crowds whose practices we wish to critique without pathologizing collective action in general. In other words, a crucial part of winning the ideological battle over the crowd is to consider the case of reactionary crowds from the perspective of CDA.

The obvious empirical starting point for such an enterprise is to examine in detail how a crowd whose practices we might wish to critique has been popularly characterized. In the first place, we need to identify if and how, linguistically and rhetorically, pathology is reified as a feature of the crowd itself. Exposing and problematizing such constructions, as well as identifying in the texts any implicit alternative discourses suppressed by the dominant characterizations, will in turn provide the space for us to propose a possible alternative, liberatory, way of talking about reactionary crowd action: that is, a way of talking about the crowd which does not have the ideological implication of serving to undermine the crowds we might support.

### **A series of ‘anti-paedophile’ crowd events**

In presenting an account of events, constructions of which form the basis of the subsequent analysis, it is clear that the attempt to be neutral in itself operates rhetorically as a (critical) alternative to accounts which stress the moral issues involved. The following does not therefore claim to be a neutral account, but is presented to orient the reader to some of the issues featuring in the analysis itself.

In Summer 2000, the abduction and death of a child in West Sussex, UK, gave rise to a good deal of public debate and campaigning, including a series of collective actions against ‘paedophiles’ in a number of British towns and cities. The mass media expressed horror and revulsion not only at the death of the child but at the actions of the ‘anti-paedophile’ crowds.

Immediately following the child’s death, one newspaper, the *News of the World*, launched a campaign calling for information on the identity and whereabouts of convicted sex offenders to be made publicly available. As part of this campaign, over two weeks the newspaper published pictures, names and addresses of 79 convicted sex offenders (‘naming and shaming’). Subsequently, crowd protests took place in a number of housing estates in which participants called for those they identified as paedophiles to be moved out.

Other newspapers and media commentators were highly critical of the ‘naming and shaming’ strategy pursued by the *News of the World*, labelling it ‘irresponsible’ since it was said to be bound to lead to ‘vigilante’ attacks. Media attention focused in particular on the Paulsgrove estate in Portsmouth, where, for seven evenings running, crowds marched upon a number of houses of alleged paedophiles. The Paulsgrove crowds, comprising not just adults but also their children, stood outside the houses bearing banners and chanting against the occupants. There was some damage to property and conflict with police (although some commentators suggested that the police did not intervene as much as they might have done), and at least 35 arrests were made. The media reported that the collective

protests came to an end in Paulsgrove when organizers agreed to suspend their action and hand over list of offenders to police.

The motives and practices of the Paulsgrove anti-paedophile protests are argued here to be anti-liberatory and indeed reactionary on a number of counts.<sup>1</sup> The principle criticism, however, can be levelled at the whole notion of ‘naming and shaming’ of paedophiles which the Paulsgrove crowd endorsed. The ‘naming and shaming’ campaign initiated by the *News of the World* can be seen as a highly effective publicity and circulation strategy for the newspaper. The moral issue of child protection and the intimidation of the individuals so named might be understood as mere vehicles for this circulation strategy. Further, the assumption of the campaign of ‘naming and shaming’ is that paedophiles are identifiable and constant personalities, and that paedophilia is always and essentially a property of the ‘other’.<sup>2</sup> ‘Naming and shaming’ thus has a ‘projection’ function.<sup>3</sup> In demonizing the ‘other’, it constructs the self as entirely free from abusive impulses. It preserves the myth of the family as a bastion of child protection. Ideologically, it serves to conceal the evidence that most child abuse takes place within families who might otherwise have ‘normal’ sexualities.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the anti-paedophiles’ ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of paedophiles is also reactionary in that it involves not only banishment, but also selective bullying and victimization of those defined as ‘paedophiles’. (Other themes within the discourse of the Paulsgrove ‘anti-paedophile’ participants and their supporters are delineated and criticized in the analysis itself.)

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<sup>1</sup> In suggesting how this particular crowd might be defined as reactionary, this account does not offer a definition of the reactionary crowd as such. Such a definition would require an analysis not only of crowd ideology but also how ideologically-driven crowd action might be mediated and its meaning changed through its relations with others outside the crowd (cf. Drury & Reicher, 2000). Such an analysis is beyond the scope of the present paper.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a deeper ideological function of ‘naming and shaming’ is the taken-for-granted nature of ‘paedophilia’ as a category. However, while we must acknowledge the socio-culturally constructed nature of sexuality and hence paedophilia, the discursive problematizing of this category per se is, again, outside the scope of the present paper.

<sup>3</sup> The use of the term ‘projection’ is not intended here in the psychoanalytic sense of a primitive, motivated defence mechanism (cf. Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988). What is being referred to here is rather a rhetorical or ideological process whereby the offering of an explanation serves to distract attention from oneself (where it might otherwise be directed) to another, whether deliberate or not.

<sup>4</sup> *The Guardian* (16 August 2000, Society p. 4) reports that, in the period 1998-9, there were 95 murders of children, only six or seven of which were at the hands of strangers.



## **The present analysis**

The analysis consists of an examination of the way the Paulsgrove ‘anti-paedophile’ crowds and their actions are talked about. Particular themes present in media accounts are identified and their implications, for the treatment of the Paulsgrove crowds and for crowds in general, unravelled. This, in turn, creates a platform for a possible alternative, liberatory, discourse.

Media sources were chosen for a number of reasons. First, mass media outlets such as newspapers are assumed to be an important and influential site for the elaboration and circulation of construction of versions of the crowd; they may use these versions in order to explain the events they are reporting on. Second, newspapers not only contain the accounts of journalists, but also the reported speech of politicians and ‘ordinary members of the public’, including some participants in the ‘anti-paedophile’ crowds. Such media sources are therefore assumed to reflect to some extent the range of available discourses on the crowd.

## **Methodology**

### **Data-set**

The data-gathering strategy entailed collecting most newspaper coverage of the ‘anti-paedophile’ crowd events in question. The data-set mostly covers the period during which the ‘anti-paedophile’ crowd events were taking place (August 2000), although a number of retrospective pieces were also collected. The data-set thus comprises clippings from 39 newspapers (issues of the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *News of the World*, *Daily Express*, *Independent*, *Independent on Sunday*, *Daily Mail*, *Mail on Sunday*, *Mirror*, *Sunday Mirror*, *Sunday Telegraph*). This includes 108 articles and 34 letters, covering approximately 2010 column inches of newsprint. Recordings from 15 radio broadcasts were also collected and transcribed. All references to the Paulsgrove (and other) ‘anti-paedophile’ protesters were word-processed.

### **Approaches to discourse**

The present analysis takes discourse as a system of statements which constructs objects and subjects (Parker, 1992); discourses are thus sets of understandings or theories, identifiable by either lexical or conceptual features, which shape subjectivities. However, to be a subject is also to be an actor. Hence the present analysis also employs insights and analytic techniques from discursive psychology, an approach which focuses on actors' use of discursive resources in social acts (Edwards & Potter, 1992). As such, this analysis can be considered eclectic. (See Edley, 2001, and Wetherell, 1998, for arguments for an eclectic approach, and Rae & Drury, 1993, for an example of an analysis which embodies such an approach.)

### **The present analysis**

The analysis took place at two levels. First, material was coded according to semantic themes. Such themes were identified linguistically or conceptually. For example, instances of the word 'mob' (as a pejorative way of referring to a crowd) were grouped together, as were references to the crowd targeting individuals not defined (by the speaker/writer) as 'paedophiles' (a theme of 'mistaken identity'). An initial coding of the material allowed for an examination of relations between semantic themes and hence a validation of the overall thematic organization. Thus, some themes were re-interpreted to be instances of sub-themes or close relations of other themes, while other themes which had been grouped together were identified as being quite different. Reflecting the concern with discourse as a system of statements which constructs objects and shapes experience, this stage of the analysis was concerned with the implications of particular semantic themes in terms of subjectivities, social relations and social policy implications.

Second, various semantic themes could be identified as elements of an interpretative repertoire (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) which speakers/writers drew upon selectively to achieve various ends. Hence, given the concern with discourse as a

practice, the way certain forms of discursive presentation and usage served particular rhetorical functions was analysed. Within this level of the analysis there was a concern not only with linguistically-identifiable themes (metaphors, tropes, interpretative repertoires etc.), but also with the way speaker used evidence in the form of anecdotal accounts or stories about particular events to bolster their constructions.

One of the key points of discursive psychology is that the same constructions can operate rhetorically in quite different ways depending on the speaker's usage (e.g., Litton & Potter, 1985). However, the interest of the present analysis is also in how an actor's usage of a particular construction might have unforeseen implications. Specifically, while commentators may refer to a 'mob' and its supposed pathology in order to apportion blame within a given context, such references may also serve to endorse and reinforce a version of social relations in which collectivity itself is a social problem.

In order to address the questions motivating the research, the analysis is presented in five parts. First the extent of and variations in the language used to pathologize the collective itself are indicated, including common metaphors. Together this material is taken as aspects of an interpretative repertoire of 'mob pathology'. This repertoire is used to construct the crowd as irrational (and illegitimate) largely by assertion. For example, referring to the crowd as a 'mob' and drawing upon a medical terminology redolent of Taine may serve to pathologize the crowd, but is relatively rhetorically weak in that an alternative (non-pathologizing) terminology might simply be counterposed (e.g. 'peaceful protest').

The second part of the analysis examines the much more robust rhetorical work of citing certain kinds of supposed evidence used to warrant the assertion that the crowd is irrational. Thus themes of uncritical 'rumour' and anecdotal examples of 'anti-paedophiles' apparently neglecting official information are cited by commentators as demonstrating the pathology and reduced intelligence of the crowd.

This part of the analysis makes the point that the use of stories about crowd actions are a key component of the process of discursive construction.

The major alternative to describing and evidencing crowd behaviour as a descent by otherwise rational individuals into irrationality is delineated in the third section of the analysis. Two related themes - 'riff-raff' and 'violent minority' - cover those instances where the actions of the 'anti-paedophile' crowds are ascribed to pre-existing anti-social tendencies of individuals within the crowd.

While the above constructions were numerically prevalent within the corpus, there were also some themes supportive of the 'anti-paedophile' participants' collective action. These 'counter-discourses' - the privileging of family relations, 'rights' and 'peaceful direct action' - are delineated and subjected to the same critical analysis as the opponents' constructions.

The final section of the analysis uses a further theme implicitly identified in participants' accounts - 'trust' - to suggest an alternative reading of the commentators' evidence for collective pathology and thus the beginnings of an alternative discourse of the reactionary crowd.

## **1 The vocabulary of crowd delegitimization**

Here we delineate the linguistic and conceptual themes which purport to make a link between the crowd and irrationality self-evident.

### *1.1 'Mob rule'*

How might we refer to collectivity? The word 'crowd' might be neutral, while the word 'community' is certainly positively valenced (Potter & Reicher, 1987). Other terms are clearly negatively valenced. In describing and explaining the collective actions by the Paulsgrove anti-'paedophile' collectives, the following terms and constructions were predominantly deployed: 'mob', 'mob rule', 'lynch mob'. The following is a typical example:

1. Vigilante mob forces family into hiding [headline]<sup>5</sup>

A family was in hiding last night after being driven from home by a mob of 150 vigilantes who smashed their windows with bricks

Guardian, 8th August, p. 8

Within the corpus, there were more than 50 references to the ‘mob’. The more neutral term ‘crowd’ was used on only a handful of occasions. The term ‘mob’ derives from the Latin *mobile vulgus* meaning ‘excitable crowd’. The term itself thus serves to convey a link between emotionality and collective ‘disorderliness’.

Going one stage further than identifying the existence of a ‘mob’ was the term ‘mob rule’, which, according to the *New Oxford Dictionary*, refers to ‘control of a political situation by those outside the conventional or lawful realm, typically involving violence and intimidation’. The declaration of ‘mob rule’ is therefore an alarm signal of a threat to democracy rather than a mere description of events. More than 20 references to ‘mob rule’ or similar terms (e.g., ‘mob law’) were identified in the corpus, sometimes quoting politicians or police officers:

2. ‘That anger and anguish has given rise to a response by a small minority who have taken the law into their own hands. However strong and understandable the emotions of those parents on the Portsmouth housing estate are, the resort to the rule of the mob is absolutely wrong.’ [statement by William Hague]

Observer, 13th August, p. 5

The term ‘lynch mob’ (including the variant ‘lynch mob rule’) was also common in the corpus:

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<sup>5</sup> Where material has been added for clarification, it is included in square brackets [like this]; where it has been edited out, it is indicated in empty square brackets, like this: [ ].

3. What began as vengeance and self-protection had become a spectacle. It was now a lynch mob.

Daily Mail, 10th August, p. 12, Roger Graef

The term 'lynch mob' has further associations of uncivilized behaviour, atavism and even prejudice (and hence irrationality) which will be explored later.

In the cases presented here, 'mob rule' refers to the content and actions of the crowd as a whole which is presented as acting as a unit. As a pejorative term, it is being used to condemn the collective and its actions. Defining collective action as 'mob rule' positions it as external to the practices of democracy and civilization. Thus, in Extract 2, the speaker's use of the term implies a contrast between a (non-rational) realm of force and emotion (which is 'absolutely wrong') and a (rational) realm of law and polity. However, the expression 'mob rule' is being put to further ends in Extract 2 than in the other examples. 'Emotions' implicitly linked to (and indeed 'giving rise to') 'the rule of the mob' are at least granted to be understandable. In this way the speaker, the then leader of the Conservative Party can position himself as sympathetic to if not on the same side as 'the parents' while distancing himself from the 'mob' which is further excluded from the process of democracy by being defined as a 'small minority', a term which in this context casts them as unrepresentative.

### *1.2 Metaphors of conflagration*

The most common metaphors used to refer to the anti-paedophile collectives also served to create a distinction between rational polity and collective processes. In a number of accounts, the collective is linked with fire. These particular metaphors reinforce an account of the collective as a (non-human) force of nature. Metaphors of fire suggest that the collective has no self-control, since self-control is a product of rationality, civilization and socialization, and since fire can only be controlled externally. The theme of fire, explosion or conflagration is again a metaphor long

associated with (negative) accounts of the crowd itself (although see Canetti, 1962). In Extract 4, a fire metaphor serves to suggest that the collective is easily liable to turn to indiscriminate destruction:

4. But the tinder-box atmosphere that is turning ill-judged rumour into missile-throwing anarchy showed little sign of abating on Paulsgrove's streets yesterday.

Independent, 9th August, p. 4

This usage thus serves to evoke an absence of behavioural control. Moreover, Extract 4 refers to an 'atmosphere' rather than to any particular subject; it is this 'atmosphere' which is the agent. Like all instances in this corpus where fire metaphors were evident, the reference is to the collective process itself; the metaphor was not mobilized to explain the convictions and actions of the lone ('anti-paedophile') individual.

### *1.3 Atavism*

The irrationality of the collective was constructed through reference to the activities of 'anti-paedophiles' as primitive, as atavistic and hence as reflective of regression to a base or uncivilized emotional or intellectual stage of development (cf. Le Bon, 1985), as in the following example:

5. There is something primitive about a baying crowd, driven by a lust for vigilante, string-'em-up justice.

Guardian 5 August, editorial p. 17

Some commentators referred to a 'lynch mob *mentality*', suggesting that the psychological nature of the collective is inherently less civilized than that of the lone individual:

6. Understandable anger at child sex offenders, irresponsibly whipped up by the News of the World's grubby naming and shaming campaign has now taken on a sinister force of its own.

Revulsion at paedophiles has been replaced by an irrational witchhunt that owes more to the mob's own desire for blood than any wish to punish the wicked. The vicious crowds in the Channel port acted on spurious evidence and dubious rumours, in some cases inflicting terror on innocent families. Many of the loudest chants came from youngsters themselves, just screaming abuse learned by rote from aggressive parents. Brainwashing youngsters into a blinkered lynch mob mentality is returning us to a shameful and uncivilised past.

Daily Express, 10 August, Opinion p. 7

There are a number of different features in Extract 6, some of which will be explored in more detail below. The second line distinguishes between two sorts of impulses which might be attributed to the 'mob'. The use of a pathologizing discourse to criticize the crowd can be understood as an attempt to blame a third party: the *News of the World*, whose 'name and shame' campaign provided names and addresses of 'paedophiles' some of whom were subsequently attacked. However, what is interesting about the argument being made here is the way the theme of the atavistic mob is developed to make this point. The argument is that there is some process internal to the crowd that operates subsequent to being 'whipped up' by the *News of the World*. The process is regressive and it is because of these consequences that the *News of the World* stands condemned as 'irresponsible'.

Part of the evidence for the collective regression cited in Extract 6 is the suggestion that parents 'brainwashed' their children. Thus a theme of intellectual degradation within the collective is buttressed by suggestions that those participating in the collective events - mostly mothers - were also *morally* degraded. The implication that participants selfishly exploited their own children is also clear in Extract 7:



7. The 300 marchers, half of them children being urged to scream abuse by their mothers, had just passed a parade of shops on Allaway Avenue in the workaday Paulsgrove district and were baying by the railings of a small group of £40-a-week council flats. A line of police in yellow, high visibility jackets kept them out.

Daily Mail, 11 August, p. 8, Geoffrey Levy

#### *1.4 Collective action as 'moral panic'*

The notion of a 'moral panic' is associated with Stanley Cohen (1972), and can be read as part of a critical sociological tradition that emerged in the 1970s which problematized media constructions and dominant definitions of crime, disorder and so on. However, while its origins parallel the problematizing agenda of critical discourse analysis itself, more recent texts which have attempted to elaborate the concept of a 'moral panic' also draw unproblematically on the concepts and terminology of (pathologising) crowd theory. Thus in their text Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994) suggest that collective behaviour 'reflects the "maverick" side of human nature' (p. 104); it is volatile and is characterized by such features as 'rumour' and 'mass hysteria and collective delusion'. In the present corpus, the theme of 'moral panic' can likewise be seen as a variant on 'atavism'; again its use typically serves to suggest that rational judgement is diminished in the collective, and emotion takes the place of thought.

The following makes clear the pathological associations of 'moral panics' - they are irrational in origin and in consequence:

8. Moral panic achieves nothing [headline]

[ ] Our existence is precarious at the best of times and the unconscious sense of insecurity we all inherit is projected onto a wide variety of targets. That is why we are prone to panics about disease and infection, most recently embodied by wildly exaggerated predictions about the number of people likely to die from CJD -scaled down once again only last week - and the more extreme claims about the effects of GM food.

[ ]

Moral panics generally result in extremely immoral behaviour, and anyone who recklessly lets loose this phenomenon in a civilized society is as much to blame as the mob itself.

Independent on Sunday, 13th August, p. 25 Joan Smith

This extract discusses the Paulsgrove events along with a number of other phenomena, including concerns about Creutzfeld-Jakob Disease and genetically modified food, which it groups together as instances of exaggerated fears. The writer presents this as part of the human condition ('we ... inherit'), but also seeks to make a 'moral' point: again, the criticism of the behaviour of the 'mob' is a way of blaming those (i.e. the *News of the World*) defined as responsible for the 'mob'. As such, the 'mob' is presented as at least initially malleable and passive, i.e., behaving as a function of others' direction or manipulation. This latter suggestion is explored in more detail below (3.2).

In some examples, the concept of 'moral panic' was sometimes linked with that of a witch-hunt. The term 'witch-hunt', was relatively common, appearing more than 11 times across the data-set. 'Witch hunt' is a pejorative term and has associations of scapegoating. In Extract 9 the term is used to suggest both irrational (prejudiced) persecution of the individual by the collective and also a return to a primitive, uncivilized past (the comparison with Salem, the American town where there was a literal witch-hunt in the nineteenth century):

9. The Labour MP Syd Rapson, 52, who has lived in Paulsgrove for 30 years, fears his home will be attacked because of claims that he was responsible for child abusers being housed in Paulsgrove. 'This is nothing other than a latter-day witch-hunt,' he said. 'A rumour starts and you end up with a modern-day Salem. This time it is Paulsgrove.'

Independent, 9th August, p. 4

Interestingly, however, while this quote can be read as critical, no person or group is named or blamed. The term 'witch-hunt' is used to condemn a set of actions,

and 'rumour' is cited as the vehicle, but there is no reference to the 'mob', the *News of the World*, the residents of Paulsgrove or any other agent. As a local MP, the speaker might not be keen to attack the *News of the World* through the strategy of openly attacking 'the mob' since that would mean attacking his own constituents.

Extract 10 puts the reader in the hypothetical position of someone falsely accused of child abduction:

10. Suppose you come across a child in distress; you offer a comforting word and a helping hand; a voice screams out: 'He's snatching my child!' Would the gathering mob believe your protestations? Even if they did, would you put yourself at risk a second time? When the mobs are looking for witches to burn, nobody's safe.

Observer, 13th August, letters, Tom Paterson

The argument here seems to suggest that pathology lies in the child protection issue which is presented as a source of exaggerated fears (or 'false positives'). However, by claiming that 'nobody is safe', the writer also implies that the 'witch-hunt' is not determined by the nature of the target but by the uncontrollable and destructive impulses emanating from the 'mob' itself.

The concept of a moral panic suggests that fears are exaggerated or disproportionate to the nature of the threat (Thompson, 1998). However, as we shall see below (Sections 2 and 5), there is a question as to criteria: what sources count as providing valid and reliable information against which a threat can be counted as 'disproportionate' or, more generally, a judgement 'mistaken'? The failure to acknowledge this question serves to buttress the suggestion that the 'anti-paedophile' crowds behave irrationally.

### *1.5 Quasi-medical terminology*

The legacy of Taine was evident in three themes identified in the text which pathologize the crowd through quasi-medical terms and concepts.

*Hysteria* refers to an uncontrollable emotion or excitement. Here it is used to convey an over-reaction to which collectives (but not lone individuals?) are particularly prone:

11. Richard Harries, the Bishop of Oxford, condemned the 'communal hysteria' triggered by the paper's campaign. [ ] 'we've only got to remember examples like the witches of Salem, where communities can get caught up in communal hysteria'

Guardian, 10th August, front page

Again, the usage in Extract 11 is part of the attempt to blame the *News of the World*. However, the use of the term 'trigger' seems to imply that not much is required for such 'communal hysteria' to occur: as well as saying something about the newspaper, it says much about collectivity and indeed civilized society itself, which is implied to be a thin veneer on an hysterical substrate.

Perhaps it is the chronic accessibility of this kind of discourse which means that the participants themselves draw upon it, as in the following:

12. 'Now, I think if we have been to innocent people's homes, then I am ashamed. I do think it got a bit hysterical. And because of what's happened we have been made to look like riff-raff. I used to walk down that shop and hold my head up high and now I feel that everyone is looking at me in disgust,' she says. 'My intention was not to have a witch-hunt.'

Guardian, 12 August, p. 5

In Extract 12, the usage of the concept 'hysteria' functions as a defence. By attributing her behaviour to pathological social forces beyond her control, the speaker presents herself as at least partly absolved of individual responsibility. Indeed, if 'intention' is the issue, then she cannot be blamed - at least not completely - since what happened was said not to be intentional. Further mitigation is presented in the

form of regret ('I am ashamed') for the (collective) actions in the (individual) 'cold light of day'.

Taine's disease metaphor is also echoed in less technical references to psychopathology - as when commentators describe crowd behaviour as '*madness*':

13. 'If they lynched me, what good would that do? This is the madness of the mob.'

Guardian, 11th August, p. 8

Given that the speaker in Extract 13 is identified by the newspaper as a 'serial paedophile' who had been 'terrorised out of his home', then his attempt to portray the possible actions of 'the mob' as useless and pointless if not 'mad' serves as an appeal to a reasonable observer to take his side.

A *contagion* account of crowd processes (cf. Le Bon, 1895) is evident in Extract 14. The suggestion is that anyone in the crowd is subject to its influence, no matter what the content of that influence, in terms of emotion, information and ultimately behaviour:

14. 'The group mentality and group dynamic leads people who are normally law abiding to join in. Violence begets violence.' [Peter Gammon, spokesman for the Association of Police Superintendents]

Guardian, 10th August, front page

Coming from a police officer, such an account serves as a justification for a particular kind of intervention. Since all members of a crowd are susceptible to influence and hence violence, irrespective of their prior intentions and individual character, it is justified for the police to intervene against the crowd as a whole (cf. Stott & Reicher, 1998).

### *1.6 'Mob pathology' in its rhetorical context*

Taken together, the particular themes identified here - 'mob rule', fire metaphors, atavism, 'moral panic', hysteria, madness and contagion - form a pattern. Since the terms and metaphors are coherently related and used to the same end of pathologizing the anti-paedophile crowd they might be understood as part of an interpretative repertoire (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) of 'mob pathology'.

The pathologizing of the crowd features as part of a rhetorical struggle amongst newspaper commentators. Drawing upon the repertoire of crowd pathology in a piece about the *News of the World's* campaign is part of the argument demonstrating that newspaper's 'irresponsibility': since crowds have an inherent tendency to pathology, the *News of the World* can be blamed for a campaign which knowingly encourages crowd action ('vigilantism') and hence 'public disorder':

15. [Peter] Grimes is pursued to his death by a vengeful mob; and we weren't very far from Portsmouth where, on Thursday night, another mob acted out the *News of the World's* 'name and shame' campaign by attacking the home of a supposed paedophile before the paper suspended its campaign. [ ] By the end [of the opera] pursued by the mob chanting 'we'll destroy!' Grimes is driven to his end. Vengeance is theirs, and justice has been frustrated, as it is when our own mobs attack the homes of supposed paedophiles. For a newspaper to claim that this is in the public interest is not only hypocritical but false.

Observer, 6th August 2000, p. 27, Geoffrey Wheatcroft

Moreover, the 'mob pathology' repertoire is used to suggest that the *News of the World* is not only morally but also legally responsible:

16: Innocent victims singled out by vigilante mobs in search of paedophiles to attack and harass are to begin legal proceedings against the *News of the World*. [ ] 'They will be able to show that the mob looked at the pictures and identified them, however wrongly, from the paper.'

Independent on Sunday, 13th August 2000, front page

It is noteworthy that only two instances of any of the themes identified above were found in over 373 column inches of coverage of Paulsgrove and the paedophile issue in the *News of the World* itself. Moreover, these two instances both work as part of arguments in defence of the *News of the World*:

17. Tory leader William Hague [ ] said: ‘Some have tried to claim that both the public anguish of the many and the mob violence of the few are the result of one Sunday paper publishing the names of convicted paedophiles.’

*News of the World*, 13th August 2000, p. 5

18. ...and those who think you don't have a right to know [headline]

[ ] Shadow Home Secretary ANN WIDDECOMBE said our campaign was ‘inciting a lynch mob mentality’

*News of the World*, 6th August 2000, p. 2

In both excerpts, the pathologizing terms are in quotes from politicians rather than comments by the newspaper journalists themselves. The quote from William Hague appears as part of a speech criticizing government policy on convicted paedophiles. Hague distances himself from those who blame the *News of the World* for ‘mob violence’. Through suggesting that ‘some have tried to claim’ he implies that the position of blaming the newspaper (rather than the government) is not a majority view. Further, the point that it is (just) ‘one’ newspaper publishing these names also operates to diminish responsibility: for how can ‘one’ newspaper’s actions be so consequential - especially when compared with the might and import of government policy?

The quote attributed to Anne Widdecombe (Extract 18) makes the opposite argument to that of Hague. However, the relationship between the ‘lynch mob mentality’ and the actions of the *News of the World* is presented as Widdecombe’s

argument, in quote marks, and as part of a column in which the failure of politicians to support the supposed needs of parents. Thus the relationship is problematized as mere opinion.

## **2 Evidencing irrationality**

The use of particular terms and concepts in describing the ‘anti-paedophile’ crowds is itself a powerful rhetorical device to present them as irrational. However, within an argument, one's opponent might ask for evidence that the behaviour is indeed irrational. Commentators brought forward a number of different types of examples or stories which served to justify their descriptions of the crowd as lacking rationality.

### *2.1 Crowd action as self-defeating*

In some comments it is suggested that that the actions of the crowd defeats its very purpose - perhaps the best criterion for an attribution of irrationality. Such comments are cited in relation to claims that the action of ‘vigilantes’ led paedophiles to try to hide their whereabouts and identity from the authorities; without monitoring, it is suggested, they would be free to offend again. The claim that the ‘anti-paedophile’ crowds ‘make matters worse’ in this way suggests that theirs is a practice which does not consider the relation between its own desires and the outcome of its actions:

19. Burnett, 55, said the ‘mindless, stupid vigilantes’ who had terrorised him out of his home were driving scores of paedophiles underground.

Guardian 11 August p. 8

Extract 19 (above) is part of an interview with one of the people identified and targeted by anti-paedophile crowds. In arguing that the crowd’s actions were worse than useless he appeals for support on the basis that paedophiles like himself should be officially monitored - rather than arguing, for example, that paedophiles like



himself are not a threat, in this context a less convincing argument against ‘naming and shaming’.

## *2.2 Lack of discrimination*

Reduced intellectual capability means reduced ability to discriminate - to make subtle judgements of difference. The main form of examples cited in the reports to warrant the claim that the ‘anti-paedophiles’ lacked the ability to discriminate was that of cases of ‘mistaken identity’ - the targeting of people who are not paedophiles but shared the same name:

20. This was confirmed by residents yesterday, who said another family had been forced to flee after a case of mistaken identity. ‘Innocent and frightened people are being caught up in these acts of violence. They must stop now,’ Mr Readhead [Deputy Chief Constable of Hampshire Police] said.

Guardian, 8th August, p. 8

Evidence that someone has been targeted because their name is the same as a ‘suspected paedophile’ portrays not only the stupidity but also the spite of the mob. In this context, a comparison with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* ‘proves’ the dangers of the indiscriminate ‘mob’:<sup>6</sup>

21. One of the lessons learned fast by the plotters in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is that a mob, once aroused, will not easily be stood down: it cannot be switched on and off.

Guardian, 11th August, p. 19, editorial

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<sup>6</sup> After Caesar's assassination, the Roman crowd had been persuaded by Mark Antony's speech that Caesar was ‘noble’ and therefore that the conspirators were traitors. They subsequently encountered Cinna the Poet, who shared the same name as one of the conspirators. Having been informed of the distinction, they killed him anyway.

This comment can again be seen as part of the attempt by other newspapers to blame the *News of the World*. The reference to the psychology of the crowd is a strategy of attributing responsibility to the ‘naming and shaming’ campaign which is said to have ‘aroused’ the ‘mob’. In this account, the crowd is not only uncontrollable, dangerous and indiscriminate in its actions, but is self-perpetuating in its destructiveness (‘cannot be switched on and off’): the crowd is like fire or a wild animal. In this way, the newspaper stands doubly condemned.

### *2.3 Neglect of official sources of information*

For an identity to be mistaken presupposes a criterion - an external way of assessing the correct identity. In a number of comments it is suggested that the police or other official sources act as such criteria, or that they have access to such correct identifications. As such, official information is taken as an unproblematic reflection of the real state of the world (rather than, for example, as a product of a social practice within which questions of definition, civil rights and criminality are constructed and struggled over between juridical agencies).

In Extracts 22 and 23, the official ‘facts’ are contrasted with the assertions of the ‘mob’ to make the point that the latter do not act upon the former:

22. police pleaded for calm after they revealed that the mob have got their facts wrong and frightened out four families who have absolutely no history of child abuse.

Daily Mail, 10th August, p. 6

23. When the reporter asked how they could be certain they had the right people, the mothers stoutly replied: ‘We know, all right. Everyone here knows who they are.’ Of course they don’t. According to Hampshire Police, the mob had already driven four innocent families out of their homes.

Daily Mail, 10th August, p. 12, Roger Graef

In Extract 22 the contrast is made stark; it is not simply that the four families had no history of child abuse, they had ‘absolutely’ no such history: this is how wrong the ‘mob’ is. Moreover, the police are presented as not only source of the facts about who is and who is not a paedophile, but, by extension, a source of facts about whether or not the ‘mob’ has its facts right. Despite the use of the dismissive phrase ‘of course they don’t’, Extract 23 is slightly weaker: rather than the police ‘revealing’ the true state of affairs, the fleeing of the ‘four innocent families’ is presented as a police version (‘according to Hampshire Police’).

#### *2.4 Reliance on ‘rumour’*

Rather than official sources, the origin of the crowd's information was characterized as ‘rumour’:

24. But so far these women have refused to show evidence that the people they’re protesting against are actually sexual offenders. They're often attacking families whose guilt is simply based on rumour, not fact. Indeed we know from the police that at least five totally innocent families have been driven off this estate.

Sunday Mirror, 13 August, p. 6, Virginia Ironside

Extract 24 compounds the evidence for the irrationality of the crowd cited in Extracts 22 and 23: now it is five families (all ‘totally innocent’). In addition, characterizing participants’ sources as rumour implies that evidence from some other source is more likely to be valid, and posits a sharp distinction between proper, reliable information (‘fact’) and folk-information. The emphasis on rumour is consistent with an account in which participants lack the judgement, intelligence or rationality to discriminate: they take just any statements uncritically as veridical reflections of the world. However, the reference to the women ‘refusing to show evidence’ also suggests something deliberate in their neglect of ‘fact’.

### 2.5 *Implications of pathologizing the crowd*

The suggestion that the ‘public’ can take the form of an irrational and dangerous ‘mob’ can serve to justify the restriction of information. Certain categories of people, such as professionals and the government, separate from ‘the public’, can be placed in a privileged position of being the only ones with access to such information. These groups are characterised as being immune from the mob mentality:

25. home office minister Paul Boateng made clear that a public right to names and addresses is not on the cards. ‘This is a law enforcement matter. The police and probation services have to be at the heart of determining who is and who is not given the relevant information. [ ] Government concern has to be the protection and welfare of children and the maintenance of public order. The News of the World’s approach in this issue of naming and shaming threatened both.’ [ ] The Association of Child Abuse Lawyers warned that giving the public controlled access to the register of child sex offenders could encourage vigilante attacks.

Guardian, 7th August 2000, p. 1

In Extract 25 we see again the use of the crowd - here referred to in the legalistic phrase ‘public order’ - to criticize the *News of the World*. The government is positioned by the speaker - a Home Office minister - as being just as concerned with this ‘public order’ as with child protection. The *Guardian* article places the statement from the minister close to one from the Association of Child Abuse Lawyers, presenting the position (restricted access) as one shared by various parties, thereby conveying consensuality or even objectivity.

The argument for restricted information might be a general one to the extent that the transformation from a public of rational citizens to an irrational mob is said not to be particular to the ‘anti-paedophile’ issue. We have seen that the ‘anti-paedophile’ crowd is described and explained using the repertoire of ‘mob pathology’ which thereby serves to apportion blame to the *News of the World*. Other discourses with different implications might well be evident in critical accounts of other types of

crowd event. For example, Postmes (1992) analyses media use of themes of 'conspiracy' to account for a political 'riot'; and Drury, Reicher & Stott (2001) show how 'locals' delegitimize an anti-roads protest by referring to participants as 'outsiders'. Yet drawing out the implications of the themes making up the 'mob pathology' repertoire here indicates its implications for other (types of) collective events, perhaps beyond the speaker's or writer's intended usage. Indeed, there is little in the 'mob pathology' repertoire, as evidenced here, which prevents it from having implications for crowds in general. Indeed, the very point of most of the comments analysed, whether implicit or explicit, is that the events in Paulsgrove reflected *generic psychological processes* rather than something specific to the 'anti-paedophile' issue: the particular crowd is pathologized by referring to supposed general collective processes of 'mob mentality', lack of discrimination, rumour, panic and so on. As Reicher (1991) argues, the use of a genericizing discourse of the 'irrational mob' used in one context serves as a precedent for responses to subsequent crowd events. In principle, therefore, the same kinds of arguments about the danger of pathological 'mobs' could be applied to information on the location of genetic crop sites, weapons installations and road-building plans. If the collective is essentially prone to pathology, the 'arousal' of a 'mob' might take it beyond the original issues motivating it and hence justifies the restriction of information in each case.

The themes identified here are therefore consistent with an account which posits the individual as the sole locus of rationality and behavioural control (cf. Le Bon, 1895). Not only is this a possible justification for dismissing the particular arguments of the crowd (for how can one have a rational debate with such an irrational 'other'?), but it also serves as grounds for dismissing the collective form itself. The suggestion is that by its inherent nature the crowd inevitably undermines the meaningfulness of any message it may have begun with. A further social implication would therefore be the suppression of the crowd not only by propaganda but also by force. In this respect, the endorsement by the police of the themes of irrationality identified here is significant (e.g., Extracts 14 and 20).

### 3 The crowd as an expression of pre-existing (anti-social) tendencies

Within the data-set, the major alternatives to constructing a descent into collective irrationality were accounts which purported to explain dominant behavioural tendencies in the crowd as an outcome of propensities already existing within (some of) the particular individuals involved. On the one hand, these propensities were posited as reflecting crowd participants' social location - their pre-existing separation from dominant civilized values and norms. On the other hand, a pre-existing desire to transgress was constructed as the property of a (powerful) minority within the crowd.

#### 2.1 'Riff-raff' accounts

Explanations in terms of the marginalized social location of the individuals composing the crowd resonate with what have been called 'riff-raff' accounts of riots: explanations which see in crowd events the convergence of anti-normative individuals, whose behaviour expresses their lowest common denominator (e.g. Allport, 1924; see Brass, 1996, pp. 16-21 for a discussion of 'riff-raff' explanations in historiography). In this vein, Paulsgrove is characterized as already 'violent' (*Mirror*, 10th August, p. 5). Similarly, the crowd events is described as reflective of a 'violent' and 'disorderly' 'section of society':

26. The anti-paedophile mobs in Portsmouth were members of a deeply criminalised section of society, the habitual violence and disorder of whose lives was almost certainly considerable  
Sunday Telegraph, 13 August Theodore Dalrymple

These kind of attributions clearly overlap with a '*class*' account in which anti-paedophile 'violence', 'intolerance' and 'ignorance' is attributed to participants' 'uncouth' class culture, which is characterised as alien to respectable, civilized (and middle class) norms and values:

27. Watching Paulsgrove Woman at work over the last few days has re-emphasised for me how scared I am of a certain part of our society - as terrified certainly, as ever the Victorian bourgeoisie were of the poor of Seven Dials. There on TV were the mums (no dads), faces studded, shoulders tattooed, too-small pink singlets worn over shell-suit bottoms, pallid faces under peroxidised hair telling tales of a diet of hamburgers, cigarettes and pesticides. [ ] Paulsgrove Woman, I felt, was of an alien race to me. No wonder the BBC employed anthropologists with cut-glass accents to interpret these people for the sake of bemused viewers. Never has the social divide seemed so wide.

Independent, 11 August, Friday Review p. 3, David Aaronovitch

The accounts above are examples of a type of argument in which a contrast is built up. The 'alien' character of the anti-paedophile participants, richly described in Extract 27, is used to explain their 'primitive' reactions. But it is then argued not to be a reason to dismiss their fears as ungrounded in reality: 'I hear the atavistic hatred in the shrill voices, but I hear other things as well' (*Independent*, 11 August, Friday Review p. 3, David Aaronovitch). In this way, the actions are condemned but the concerns of the participants can be acknowledged.

### *3.2 Opportunistic violent minorities*

The 'opportunism' account differs from a 'riff-raff' attribution in suggesting that it is only a minority who are engaged in unjustified violence. They are said to use the crowd as a vehicle or cloak to express their anti-social tendencies:

28. The violence was being initiated by thugs using parents' fears about paedophiles as an excuse for lawlessness, he [Peter Gammon, spokesman for the Association of Police Superintendents] said. 'In most cases there is a violent element infiltrating these groups and initiating the violence, he said.

Guardian, 10th August, front page

Extract 28 features as part of a broader blaming account. The speaker begins by criticizing the *News of the World* for 'creating an atmosphere of fear'. He then questions the genuineness of the motives of at least some of the 'anti-paedophile' participants, a discrediting strategy discussed for example in Wetherell & Potter's (1992) analysis of racist accounts of protest. Here, however, constructing a distinction between the 'thug' minority and 'parents', with the former 'infiltrating' the latter, allows the speaker to position himself with the parents, something important for the creation of 'public consent', especially in a context where there is an issue over the trustworthiness of the police (see Section 5.1, below).

Some accounts broadly supportive of 'anti-paedophile' collective action also strive to distinguish the opportunistic minority from the majority. The minority is unrepresentative in that such participants are not motivated by a proper concern with child welfare but simply want to cause trouble for its own sake:

29. 'when you get a public gathering like that there is always going to be an element there to cause trouble. And of course it was that small minority who grabbed the headlines and suddenly we were branded an angry mob. We can't deny there was trouble, but it only happened on two nights and was caused by a group of teenagers, not us.'

News of the World, 13th August 2000, p. 4

In Extract 29, the participant's description of the role of the 'troublesome minority' is a defence in the form of a script formulation (Edwards, 1997). The existence of the troublesome minority is presented as a taken-for-granted or routine aspect of public gatherings. The fact that this minority 'grabbed the headlines' - as such minorities routinely do, it is claimed - should not, therefore, be taken as a true representation of the events. The statement ends with a three-part list which attempts to contextualise the 'trouble' as unrepresentative and to locate the crowd's dominant tendency within the normative (law-abiding) mainstream. The statement as a whole thus serves as a



defence for the speaker against the accusation that s/he and the crowd as a whole were the source of 'trouble'.

The construction of the crowd as containing an 'opportunistic violent minority' potentially dovetails with the account of the crowd as a locus of mass irrationality. If the collective is lacking in rational judgement, then it is susceptible to being directed by a powerful minority or demagogue. The crowd as a whole can be characterized as irrational because of the malign influence of the minority:

30. The power of the mob is a terrifying phenomenon, which dictators the world over have exploited to their advantage. Hitler is said to have studied crowd psychology and his skilful manipulation of it was demonstrated at Nuremburg rallies.

Independent on Sunday, 13th August, p. 25 Joan Smith

In contrast to Extract 29 (taken from the *News of the World*) which distinguishes troublesome minority from normative majority within the crowd, Extract 30 (taken from the *Independent on Sunday*) characterizes the crowd as a whole as potentially troublesome (a 'mob'). While the former characterization serves to defend the *News of the World* from the accusation of cynically 'rousing a mob' (cf. Extract 18), the latter serves as part of a critique of that newspaper precisely for such 'exploitation' and 'manipulation'.

Within a crowd, the influence of a minority is often characterized as 'hi-jack', implying that the direction is a perversion of the collective's original purposes. In particular, 'hi-jack' is offered as an explanation for the posited change in the collective's actions from 'peaceful protest' to 'violence':

31. [Deputy Chief Constable of Hampshire Ian Readhead:] 'The organisers must realise that their peaceful protests are being hijacked by a violent minority who are intent on causing criminal acts.

Guardian, 8th August, p. 8

If, as Extract 31 states, the ‘organizers’ are or should be aware but can do nothing about the hi-jacking, the role of the ‘violent minority’ can serve as a justification for the police acting against the ‘peaceful protests’ as a whole (see Stott & Reicher, 1998). Indeed, the statement might be read as an attempt by the police to put pressure on the ‘organizers’ (cf. Extract 20).

### *3.3 Implications of attributing crowd behaviour to pre-existing (anti-social) tendencies*

In terms of its social implications, the suggestion that the crowd expresses pre-existing individual tendencies is in fact no alternative to the suggestion that the crowd represents a descent into irrationality. If a crowd represents the convergence of anti-social elements or the social influence of a ‘violent minority’, its behaviour and its goals will be less meaningful and civilized than that of the lone citizen. Hence, again, the suppression of the crowd becomes a logical necessity.

## **4 Participants' alternative accounts of themselves**

Anti-paedophile participants and their supporters did not simply echo some of their critics' constructions in order to explain and justify themselves. They also mobilized a number of ‘counter-discourses’. Moreover, the critics too sometimes drew upon these counter-discourses in order to explain the events, if only as part of wider arguments which ultimately condemned the anti-paedophiles' actions.

### *4.1 Family values*

Within the participants' and supporters' own accounts, the major alternative to collective irrationality was the theme of child protection. In this kind of account, the crowd actions did not reflect atavism, hysteria or criminal opportunism, but the proper

duties of parents to their children. This is a powerful account; for who would deny that parents should be concerned with the protection of their children?

32. 'We are not yobs. We are Paulsgrove parents protecting our kids.' [Banner wording]

Mirror, 10th August, p. 4

In Extract 32, for example, participants fend off the accusation that they are 'yobs' by referring to themselves positively ('parents'). As members of the category 'parents', the participants would be fully expected and entitled to 'protect their kids'. Actions which might otherwise be described as 'yobbery' are redefined as morally justified (cf. Potter, 1996).

Thus, an alternative to talking about 'moral degradation' (cf. Extracts 6 and 7) in the relation of the 'anti-paedophile' mothers to their children is to construct such activities as reflective of 'maternal instincts'. Rather than selfish exploitation, this account suggests that the subject puts the interests of her child before herself. The explanation is naturalized in the quote below through the reference to an 'instinct':

33. Nothing is more powerful than the instinct of a mother to protect her child. That is why mothers in Portsmouth have been protesting at the presence of 20 paedophiles they claim are living on their housing estate.

Mirror, 10th August, editorial p. 6

Extract 33 would therefore seem to be statement in support of the anti-paedophile participants. However, it is *critical* support for these 'mothers' - who 'claim' (rather than 'know') that '20 paedophiles' are living on their estate - and is actually part of an argument which ultimately condemns the anti-paedophiles' actions.

#### *4.2 Justification and rights*

Talk within which the actions of the collective are defined as justified posits a rational relation between the perceived problem and the response. However, a distinction can be made between the emotional and the behavioural response. Extracts 34 and 35 are typical of arguments of the form ‘they have been treated badly, and so their anger is legitimate’, but which then go on to suggest that the particular behavioural response is not so justified.

34. If it is true, as they claim, that Paulsgrove has been used as a dumping ground for convicted molesters, then they have every right to be furious.

Guardian, 11th August, p. 19, editorial

35. These women - so disgracefully patronised by commentator after commentator - were legitimately frightened about what was happening on their estate

Evening Standard, 14 August, Paul Barker

However, Extract 36, from the *News of the World* editor identified with the ‘name and shame’ campaign, takes the same argument further by suggesting that the behavioural response (‘vigilante action’) is simply what ‘otherwise reasonable citizens’ are ‘forced’ to do: it is justified by their situation which is suggested to be extreme (‘the flood of perverts’). The statement expresses regret, but this time the argument is not part of an attempt to apportion blame, even with mitigation, to the anti-paedophile participants, but instead to the government and local authority policy.

36. But it is an unfortunate fact that, pushed to the extreme, otherwise reasonable citizens are forced into vigilante action. Families living on rundown estates react angrily against the flood of perverts rehoused into their communities. Reaction against them, sometimes violent, has happened frequently in the past, but has gone unreported until we launched [the] For Sarah [campaign].

News of the World, 13th August 2000, p. 2, Editorial, Rebekah Wade

Talk of 'legitimacy' connects with the 'family' discourse insofar as the outrage of the parents of children (said to be in danger) is said to be particularly justified. Moreover, in some accounts parents are also said to have particular formal rights. The construction of the particular rights of parents 'to know' represents an alternative to professional and state control of knowledge. In some accounts, since parents are 'ordinary members of the public', enhancing such parental rights means 'popular' rather than elite control of knowledge:

37. Give everyone the right to know the identity of convicted child sex offenders in their area.  
[ ] Petition to Home Secretary Jack Straw [ ] it is every parent's right to know if there is a convicted paedophile living in their neighbourhood.

News of the World, 6th August 2000, p. 5

In the rhetorical context of the argument (and circulation war) between the *News of the World* and the other newspapers, this argument positions the newspaper as on the side of 'parents' and the 'public', while critics are positioned as 'know-bests' who are soft on 'paedophiles': far from 'stirring up mobs', the *News of the World* claims to reflect 'popular opinion'.

In some examples, implicit within talk of the 'rights of parents to know' is a discourse of knowledge as power. Armed with information, parents and indeed victims can become 'empowered', according to such accounts.

38. They were calling it their 'list of power' on the Paulsgrove estate yesterday

Independent, 10th August, front page

Through the use of quote marks, Extract 38 problematizes anti-paedophile participants' talk which links information with power. However, the persuasiveness of this kind of construction, particularly as developed in arguments in the *News of the*

*World* (e.g., Extract 37) lies in its appeal to our sympathy with the side of ‘victims’, who, according to such accounts, are now in a position to transcend their passive status.

#### *4.3 Peaceful direct action*

The name of the organizing group, ‘the Peaceful Protesters of Paulsgrove’ itself constitutes an alternative to a designation of irrational ‘mob rule’. If one’s actions constitute ‘protest’, they might be coherently part of the democratic process and hence legitimate. In addition, the use of the term ‘peaceful’ suggests self-control and limits to behaviour.

A similar alternative to ‘mob rule’ was to refer to the collective’s practices as ‘direct action’:

39. One PPP member, a 36-year-old woman who has two children, said: ‘We can be quietly satisfied that much of our work has been done. It shows that direct action can and does work.’

Independent, 11 August, Front page

‘Direct action’ may not always be defined as part of the democratic process and positively valenced, but it at least implies rational actors - i.e., participants with ‘political’ goals rather than mere ‘bloodlust’ (cf. Extract 6). Indeed in Extract 39, the speaker’s reference to ‘quiet satisfaction’ and ‘work being done’ suggests calm and careful diligence rather than passion and aggression.

#### *4.4 Implications of participants’ alternative accounts*

Participants’ own accounts position them not as part of pathological or criminal eruptions on the margins of civilized society but as legitimate actors within the normative mainstream. Within such accounts, they espouse dominant social values (e.g. family life) and intervene politically in a form that is consensually recognized as acceptable and rational.

However, even if we reject irrationalism, this need not mean accepting the rationalizing discourses of the anti-paedophile protesters themselves. Indeed, from a critical (but not pathologizing) perspective, the implications of the participants' alternative ways of constructing their collective action point to the need to problematize them.

First of all, the construction of family relations as a natural bulwark of child protection serves to obscure the role of the family as an active agent of oppression and child abuse. Consistent with the broader 'name and shame' theme to which it is related, this privileging of the family serves to attribute possible blame to some external 'other' rather than to oneself and one's close relations. Abuse within the family is what is unspoken within this theme and hence what can be covered up and normalized in practice.

Second, while historically the discourse of 'rights' has been associated with progressive developments, one only has to think of such phrases as 'rights for whites' to be reminded that this discourse can also be used to justify discrimination. 'Rights', which exist in relation to 'responsibilities', speak of a subject or social category inherently in conflict with others and whose interests therefore need to be regulated and codified. In this particular context, enhanced 'rights' for those whose children are supposedly threatened by paedophiles means restrictions (and threats) for the latter.

Finally, the implications of constructing one's own collective activity as 'direct action' are also not straightforwardly unproblematic. The term 'direct action' has characteristically been associated with progressive and even revolutionary movements, such as anarcho-syndicalism and the anti-roads struggle (e.g., McKay, 1998). However, the emphasis on the form itself serves to detract from a possible reactionary content. The same issue arises with the discourse of 'empowerment' (cf. Extract 38), which occurs not just in the talk of activists (of both left and right) but also in discourses which justify individualizing government policies and management practices. The key question here is who - what subject - is 'empowered' to take 'direct action'? Although ideologically an advance on referring to collective action with the

pejorative and delegitimizing discourse of ‘mob pathology’, support for ‘direct action’ might mean uncritical acclamation of any extra-parliamentary intervention, even the most reactionary.

## **5 Towards a liberatory discourse of the reactionary crowd**

Having suggested how and why the constructions of the ‘anti-paedophile’ crowd participants identified within the data-set might be ideologically problematic, we can now begin to suggest an alternative, liberatory, way of talking about the reactionary crowd. In fact, it is within the texts and constructions already analysed that we can identify the seeds of such an alternative. This analysis centres round a theme of ‘trust’, which was far less prevalent in the material than the themes identified above, and was found exclusively in the talk of the ‘anti-paedophile’ participants themselves.

### *5.1 A worked example: Characterizing ‘information’ and influence*

As we have suggested, one of the most telling rhetorical blows against the crowd was the presentation by commentators of examples of crowd participants neglecting official sources of information and relying instead on ‘rumour’ which in turn was said to lead to a lack of discrimination and hence cases of mistaken identity. The underlying assumption in all the accounts characterizing the crowd as irrational because of its neglect of official sources of information was that these official sources were themselves unproblematic, valid and reliable. The main official sources of information on the number, identity and whereabouts of sex-offenders are the council and the police. But such sources can only be defined as trustworthy if they are positioned either as neutral or on one's own side. In the accounts of the participants, however, these categories are described as being ‘soft’ on, and hence on the same side, as the ‘paedophiles’:



40. 'When we went to the council to get one paedophile moved, they fitted his home with a fire door. It was as if their main concern was to protect the paedophile, not our kids. That's why we took to the streets. We felt we had to take action'

News of the World, 13th August 2000, p. 4

Thus far from being neutral sources of information, these accounts argue that the trustworthiness of the officials is precisely what is at issue:

41. 'The problem is that at the moment police are supporting the paedophiles rather than local residents. The cops have even been smuggling them out in police uniforms to prevent us getting at them.'

Guardian, 10th August, p. 3

Whether or not this story of police uniforms is apocryphal is less important than its function, which, like other statements from the 'anti-paedophiles', is to position the police outside the community ('local residents') and hence outside a shared relationship of trust (cf. Potter & Reicher, 1987).

By contrast, one's neighbours (at least those not already defined as 'paedophiles') are counted as reliable sources - particularly those neighbours who are themselves victims of paedophiles. Implicitly, not only are such people closer to the 'problem' (and hence have a more accurate representation of it) than the police and authorities, but they are also defined as part of the participants' own local community, which is characterized as in conflict with the 'paedophiles' and their 'supporters':

42. Katrina Kessell [ ] said: 'There is no way that the names we have are going to be given to the police or the council They have been given to us confidentially by victims and we have neither the trust nor the belief that they will be used by the police to achieve what we want - no more perverts on our estate.'

Independent, 10th August, front page

These anti-paedophile participants' accounts reject the suggestion that there is no reliability check on the 'rumours'. However, the check is perhaps not what the commentators and authorities might define as reliable. It is the in-group of fellow neighbours whose considered judgement is trusted and who are therefore the arbiters of facticity. Internet and other sources are filtered through the judgement of this neighbourhood in-group. The establishing of facts is therefore presented as a collective process of verification among people who trust each other since they share the same concerns:

43. She [Katrina Kessell] says people have been bringing her 'documentary evidence' of men they claim are paedophiles. Kessell says it was from these accounts that the protesters' list of 22 names - 'and still growing' - was compiled. [ ] Kessell [ ] said: 'We all decide as a group whether someone should be on the list from the information we have gathered, we check all the details before we go and stand outside a house.' She will not say what kind of proof is required.

Observer, 13th August, p. 5

If official information is consistently rejected as unreliable, and if only those within the (local and normative) 'community' are constructed as 'trustworthy', then the opposition is not between 'irrationality' and 'rationality' but rather between two competing rationalities: 'ours' and 'theirs'. Within such an account, 'rumour' certainly does not refer to just 'any' information from just 'anyone' (as the commentators suggest) but rather information from those who share the 'anti-paedophile' discourse ('child protection', 'parental rights' etc.).

Further, if the process of influence can be characterized as one of 'trust' within a discourse community, then the notion of 'hi-jacking' becomes problematic also. If the crowd's action reflects the definitions provided within a particular discourse rather than being indiscriminate, then only those defined as bona fide (and

indeed typical) members of the collective will be able to exert a leadership influence, and the direction of their influence will be based on the identity of the collective rather than being a perversion of it.

Indeed, when we look at who is singled out by the commentators as the ‘ringleader’ of the protests, it is someone characterized (by herself and others) as a local single parent and a victim of abuse, both of which might count as qualifications for her position as the prototype, or ‘spokesperson’, for the collective as a whole:

44. Ms Kessell denies that she is usually the ringleader or spokesperson for the Paulsgrove Peaceful Protesters, although she is the one with the megaphone at the front of the march  
Guardian, 12 August, p. 5

Thus, Extract 44 reports Katrina Kessell's denial that she is the ‘ringleader’ only to present what we are to take for evidence that she is indeed such a leader.

This alternative account does not deny that an ‘unrepresentative minority’ may indeed use the crowd as a ‘cloak’ for enacting its own aims. However, it would suggest that ‘opportunism’ would be rejected by the rest of the crowd as being inconsistent with collective aims (see Extract 29).

### *5.2 Psychological process and ideological content*

Perhaps the appeal, if any, of the accounts which pathologize the ‘anti-paedophile’ crowds lie in the feeling of readers that there was something very wrong in what was happening in Portsmouth and other places; ‘pathology’ was an available discourse to voice that feeling. But where, precisely, was this pathology or wrongness located and attributed by the media accounts? Although particular individuals or sections of society were sometimes pathologized, more typically the collective process itself was presented as the locus of irrationality. While such irrationality was traced to the supposed exploitation of ‘public fears’ by the *News of the World* newspaper, this exploitation was premised on the assumed inferior mentality of the crowd *as a crowd*:

its 'mob mentality', atavism and processes of contagion, for example. The crowd itself, rather than the anti-paedophile discourse, was very often presented as 'the problem'.

A striking example was an incident first reported some days after the Paulsgrove events. In Gwent, a paediatrician's front door was daubed with anti-paedophile graffiti. An act that 'everyone' would agree was utterly crass, was portrayed as emblematic of the wider 'anti-paedophile' campaign: in this act of vandalism, the brutishness of the crowd protests as a whole was supposedly epitomized. No evidence was presented, however, as to whether this was a crowd act rather than the work of one or two individuals acting alone. Indeed, crucially, reports either failed to make the distinction, or even explicitly attributed the acts to 'mobs':

45. Portsmouth mobs attacked local paedophiles, and Gwent mobs got their words mixed up and attacked a local paediatrician.

Guardian, 30th December 2000, Weekend p. 10, Jon Ronson

If there is 'pathology' in such actions we might characterize it as sociopathology rather than psychopathology (Reicher, 2000). In instances such as this and the other actions of the 'anti-paedophile' collectives, there is a clear ideological pattern - a world-view which includes one's own place, the position of paedophiles, the role of the family and the function of the authorities and so on. On this reading, the problem is not that participants are not acting rationally (i.e., not making logical links between the different constructs in their ideology), it is rather that their particular rationality - their ideology itself - is reactionary and mystifying.

A key point here is that ideological practices, whose goals included the demonization, identification and harsh treatment of 'paedophiles', are not the sole property of crowds. Indeed it was a newspaper editor rather than a crowd who first promoted 'naming and shaming'. The accounts of pathological 'mob rule' - particularly those detailed in Section 2 which presented commentators' evidence for

collective irrationality - characteristically managed to conflate the *content* of the crowd's identity with generic collective psychological *processes*: where mystification is found in the former, it is attributed to the latter. A contingent, historical, social constructed mystification - the 'anti-paedophile' ideology and its associated practices - is thus reified into a feature of the crowd itself *as* a crowd.

By contrast, a distinction between general crowd processes and particular crowd identities or subjectivities (which may or may not be ideological) allows us to avoid pathologizing crowds *as* crowds. Thus rather than 'uncritical rumour', 'contagion' or 'hi-jacking', we might talk about 'trust' and even 'solidarity' within crowds, but add that the content and boundaries of that trust and solidarity are a function of the nature of the particular crowd identity and its discourse, which are social and historical constructions.

### **Discussion**

The occurrence of particular terms and concepts in this corpus - such as 'mob rule', 'moral panic', contagion and 'communal hysteria' - together can be seen as evidence of the presence and use of an interpretative repertoire of 'mob pathology'. 'Mob pathology' was evidenced by commentators in examples of the crowd's neglect of 'the facts', its reliance on 'rumour' and in the cavalier way it mistook the innocent for the sex-offender. In various settings, speakers drew upon the repertoire to refer to the crowd to various ends - particularly, through criticizing the Paulsgrove crowd, to criticize (or defend) the *News of the World*. However, the argument here is that, in addition to this particular, situated, strategic usage, the overall ideological consequence of drawing upon this repertoire is to serve to exclude the crowd *as such* from the realm of rational debate and hence delegitimize the content of crowd action. Where practices and discourses of a particular (reactionary) crowd are reified as generic collective processes, collective action per se is pathologized. Since the 'public' of rational, individual citizens may degenerate into an atavistic 'mob', it is

justified to restrict knowledge (in this case about the identity and whereabouts of sex-offenders) to the professionals who 'know best'. Such constructions of the relationship between individual and collective can also operate as a rationale for strict control (and harsh suppression) of all crowd and protest events.

Within the corpus analysed, the main alternative to a discourse of collective pathology was a range of constructions which explained (violent) crowd behaviour in terms of pre-existing anti-social tendencies. As well as the attribution of crowd violence to powerful and opportunistic minorities (Budworth, 1991; Postmes, 1992), the analysis identified examples where crowd behaviour was explained in terms of participants' social (and class) location. Whether or not such attributions would have been so prevalent had the anti-paedophile protests taken place in a middle class neighbourhood is a question that might be explored in future research. Historically, at least, the 'classic' crowd theorists used pathologizing discourse mostly to refer to collective actions by the proletarian class, which they thought was particularly susceptible to the descent into irrationality (McClelland, 1989).

Consistent with previous studies of talk around crowd events, the present analysis noted a link between social location and discursive construction. First, there was a difference between the *News of the World* and its critics. Writers in the other newspapers tended to use the repertoire of 'mob pathology' (i.e. as a 'fact') at least in part as a way of blaming the *News of the World*, while the latter tended to feature the repertoire only as an account put in the mouths of others (i.e. as an 'opinion') and hence avoid blame. Second, anti-paedophile participants tended to refer to themselves more often using rationalizing and legitimizing discourses as a defence against the pathologizing and criminalizing accusations of their critics.

However, there were also examples of the same kinds of constructions being made across different groups. In particular, it is worth noting that the pathologizing discourse was common to politically different newspapers. While we might expect the right-wing press, which criticizes and delegitimizes all kinds of protests, to use this kind of terminology, liberal commentators (in *The Guardian*, for example) who are

more likely to attribute rationality to the actions of progressive protests might be expected to try to avoid such a discourse of pathology. What, then, accounts for this liberal expression of horror?

The speculation here is that it is an issue of power. Lone individuals endorsing a reactionary and mystifying ideology have little power to act upon it. The most that they can do, perhaps, is to act under cover of night. (According to media reports, the daubing of graffiti on the Gwent paediatrician's door - referred to in Extract 45 - took place at night when no one was about.) However, collective support enables people to put their beliefs into practice in broad daylight, even in the face of opposition from the police (Drury & Reicher, 1999). In short, the crowd empowers. The liberal horror expressed at the anti-paedophile 'mob' may therefore be the horror at a reactionary ideology enacted.

The analysis argued for - and the above argument is premised upon - a conceptual separation between a particular crowd identity (and its associated discourse) and general attributes of crowds as the basis for an alternative way of talking about the (reactionary) crowd. In this account, criticism is directed not at the crowd *per se* but against its particular identity, practices and discourses, which we suggest are ideological (mystifying). Analytically distinguishing between crowd process and identity-content<sup>7</sup> allows us to offer an alternative account of some of the supposed evidence of pathology. In this account, social influence is not 'contagion', uncritical 'rumour' or 'hi-jack' by a powerful minority, but rather is contingent upon who is defined as a 'trustworthy' source, which, in turn, depends upon their (in-group) membership - their endorsement of the crowd identity and its discourse. Mutual trust within a crowd, and the exclusion of an out-group (typically the police and authorities), is not therefore pathological, but is rather a necessary component in an account of the crowd - including the crowd as an agent of both progressive and

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<sup>7</sup> We are certainly not arguing that process (form) and identity (content) are somehow mutually independent. Form always presupposes - and cannot exist without - content, but does not usually determine a *particular* content.

revolutionary change. The present analysis can thus be seen as a contribution to a wider ideological battle in support of the crowd taking place across the social sciences. In such disciplines as history (e.g., Rudé, 1981; Thompson, 1991), sociology (e.g., McPhail, 1991; Turner & Killian, 1987), communication studies (e.g., Waddington, Jones & Critcher, 1989) and psychology (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher, 1984, 1996; Stott & Reicher, 1998), researchers have attempted to restore social meaning to crowd action.

The limits of this ideological battle are the limits of discourse analysis itself. It is one thing to show in an analysis that a particular kind of discourse has ideological consequences, it is quite another for an alternative, liberatory, discourse to be widely adopted instead. As Parker (1992) argues, for discursive change to occur there needs to be change in the social relations within which certain discourses rather than others become adequate and appropriate. On the one hand, discourses which pathologize and otherwise delegitimize the crowd serve to reproduce in ideology and social policy a set of social relations within which the crowd is constructed as a 'problem' rather than a 'solution'. On the other hand, the evidence from here and elsewhere suggests that those participating in crowd events - experiencing new forms of social relations - find different and sometimes liberatory ways of talking about the crowd. Collective action in all its forms has declined in Britain and other Western nations since the mid-1980s with the setbacks in the class struggle. An account of the crowd as a meaningful social subject will become more widely accepted only to the extent that this long-term trend is reversed through an resurgence in effective collective actions as part of an overall upsurge in the class struggle.

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