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**CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE, MORAL PANIC, AND THE MASS MEDIA:
A CASE STUDY IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DEVIANCE**

by

STEVEN M. GORELICK

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, the City University of New York**

1995

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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When I was twelve years old, one of the most respected physicians in our Los Angeles suburb was arrested for the murder of his wife. After a long, highly publicized trial, both the doctor and his mistress were convicted and sentenced to die in the California gas chamber. The death sentence was eventually commuted, but the two received life sentences.

I will never forget the feelings of shock in our community. Some of our neighbors reacted by denying that the doctor could have done such a thing. Others, angered by the cruelty of the murder, reacted with rage. No one who lived through these events could ever forget what it was like for a relatively sedate suburb to be buffeted by such a violent crime.

My reaction was to create a scrapbook. Each day, after our local afternoon newspaper was delivered, I would immediately scan the pages for the latest clippings, carefully cut them out, and paste them neatly on a fresh page. Eventually, my grandfather suggested that collecting crime news was not a very healthy activity for a twelve year-old, and I accepted a \$10 bribe to throw it away. I should have known better. This scrapbook was the origin of my interest in the press coverage of crime and violence. My grandfather did not live to see me complete this work, but I have a feeling he would be proud of me. With profound appreciation and gratitude, and in no particular order, let me try to thank all the others who helped along the way:

I have never met some of the extraordinary scholars who guided and

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For Amy

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CHAPTER I

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM: CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE, MORAL PANIC, AND THE MASS MEDIA

In September, 1983, two ten-year-old girls, escorted by their mothers, entered the Jordan, Minnesota police department and told a disturbing story: James John Rud, a 27 year-old sanitation worker living by himself on the outskirts of the small town, had been sexually abusing neighborhood children. The girls explained that, after inviting them into his trailer, Rud forced them to engage in sexual intercourse. Within hours, he was arrested and jailed.

If the matter had ended there, very few people would have heard about what eventually came to be known as the Jordan case. A short trial would have been held, medical evidence and testimony would have been presented, and a jury would have decided on the defendant's guilt or innocence. Aside from coverage in the local community newspaper, the story almost certainly would not have attracted national attention. Nothing, however, was routine about the Jordan case. Within several months, the emerging details of the bizarre case had attracted the attention of journalists across the country, and a period of intense national interest in child sexual abuse had begun.

The Jordan case evolved in a manner that would soon be repeated in cities across the country: In the days after the girls revealed their story, many other

worried parents in the small Minnesota town began to wonder if their children had also been abused. Their worst fears were confirmed when other children began to tell unusually graphic and similar stories about abuse by siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, other children, and by the parents themselves. The local prosecutor, Kathleen Morris, heard children describe sex parties, alcohol and drug abuse, and incest. Eventually, a few of the children reluctantly revealed that a child had been tortured with a knife and murdered for the entertainment of the adult participants at a sex party. By early 1984, Morris was preparing charges against two dozen men and women in the small community.

In exchange for leniency, James John Rud prepared a lengthy statement in which he confirmed virtually all of the details reported by the children. He admitted that sex parties had occurred and -- while denying that he had seen a murder -- named a number of adults who had engaged in sex with children. Just two weeks later, the trial of the first two defendants -- Robert and Lois Bentz -- began with Rud's testimony. Yet just as quickly as the case had captured public attention, it collapsed in a morass of inconsistencies and recantations (Crewdson 1988). By August, it had all but evaporated: The Bentz's had been acquitted; most of the children had recanted their stories; and Rud had admitted that his statement had been a lie. While he was eventually convicted of several limited counts of sexual abuse, none of the other adults were ever charged. An intensive FBI investigation was unable to confirm that

a child had been murdered.

From the Jordan Case to a Wave of Local and National Press Coverage

What really happened in Jordan will never be known. A report by the Minnesota Attorney General conceded both that some people were probably unjustly accused and that some guilty people may have escaped conviction because of insufficiently compelling evidence (Humphrey 1984). Yet the details of the case are less important to the present study than the intense wave of national publicity that followed almost immediately. Every major newspaper and television network increased its coverage of child sexual abuse. Network television news stories about threats to children, of which there had been an average of 16.4 per year from 1970 to 1980, were broadcast an average of 66.6 times per year between 1981 and 1987 (Best 1990). In one year, the number of stories in the New York Times about sex crimes against children almost tripled. The first television movie about child sexual abuse, a depiction of father-daughter incest entitled Something About Amelia, was broadcast in 1984. Mass media coverage of all threats to children seemed to grow rapidly.

After the initial wave of publicity about the Jordan, Minnesota case, allegations of child sexual abuse -- often taking place in day care centers, institutions, or schools -- began to surface in many major American cities. State and federal government officials began inquiries into the quality of child care and the dangers of sexual abuse (Crewdson 1988). Vocal individuals and

interest groups began to speak out on every possible aspect of this issue, from those making the controversial claim that sexual contact with adults could be a positive experience for children (Schultz 1982) to those who favored the chemical castration of sex offenders.

While state and federal legislators were not prominent in the initial wave of publicity, they were quick to sense the rising tide of public opinion and enter the fray. Early in 1984, Sen. Paula Hawkins (R-Florida) stunned the audience at a national conference on sexual abuse when she announced that at the age of six she had been sexually abused by a neighbor. By 1985, with a speed and urgency that is rare in the normally cumbersome legislative process, state legislatures were on the verge of passing 250 bills designed to facilitate the prosecution of sex offenders. This explosion of publicity and legislative response led a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist to remark several years later that 1984 "had been the year of the sexually abused child" (Crewdson 1988).

Between 1984 and 1985, a period in which a growing number of cases came to light, the pattern in many American cities was strikingly similar: After an initial report of child sexual abuse -- usually taking place in a nursery, day care center, or other public setting -- intense scrutiny by local news media would lead to the discovery of other similar cases. As these newer cases emerged, described by children in graphic and horrifying detail, news accounts would typically report the claims of officials that child sexual abuse was "becoming a pervasive problem throughout the nation's schools" (New York

Daily News: August 4, 1984) or that the most recent cases only represent "the tip of the iceberg" (New York Daily News: August 7, 1984). Other parties, acting as what Becker (1963:147) calls "moral entrepreneurs," would cite a specific case of sexual abuse as evidence that all types of crimes against children – abductions by strangers (Gentry 1988), physical abuse (Pfohl 1977), Halloween sadism (Best and Horiuchi 1985) – were increasing. Finally, responding to this explosion of coverage, agents of social control (prosecutors, police, legislators, etc.) would aggressively detect and prosecute specific cases and implement a variety of measures to deal with the growing menace. These included mandatory fingerprinting of day-care workers, allowing children to testify on videotape, and the exemption of children's testimony from normal rules against hearsay.

Perhaps the most widely publicized case took place at the McMartin Pre-School in Manhattan Beach, California. The McMartin case lasted from early 1984, when charges were filed against the school's owner and several of the teachers, until 1990, when the remaining defendant was acquitted. The case eventually became the longest criminal trial in American history.

While the McMartin case received the most attention from the national media, other cases with virtually the same characteristics took place primarily in local or regional contexts and dominated local news coverage for as long as five years. One attempt to list these cases was published by the Memphis Commercial Appeal as part of a series "Justice Abused: A 1980s Witch Hunt."

While the objectivity of the series and the reliability of the list was almost certainly tainted by the authors' "witch hunt" thesis, they were able to identify at least thirty-six cases of ritual child sexual abuse between 1983 and 1987 in day-care or other institutional settings. They defined ritual abuse as "child sexual abuse involving a group of adults molesting children in which threats are used to keep children from telling what happened. The setting has pornographic or occult overtones" (Charlier and Downing 1988:A1). A more comprehensive study by a group of social scientists uncovered 270 substantiated cases of all types of sexual abuse in day-care facilities between 1983 and 1985 (Finkelhor, Williams, and Burns 1988), although this study's method of classifying a case as substantiated has been criticized for its excessive reliance on the judgement of child welfare officials (Nathan 1991). However, the fact that these studies might have incorrectly measured the actual incidence of child sexual abuse cases in day-care is less important to the present study than the extent to which they demonstrate the wave of public concern. Many of these cases, especially the 36 cited in the Memphis Commercial Appeal series, involved multiple victims and multiple offenders and took anywhere from two to four years to move from an initial investigation to final resolution. At least several set state records for the length of jury deliberations and a number remain in various stages of appeal.

It should be noted that this was not the first extended period in which widely publicized sex crimes have led to swift attempts at social control.

Sutherland (1950) describes how the 1937 sexual assaults and murders of four girls in New York City led a number of states to pass so-called sexual psychopath laws. These laws permitted the indefinite imprisonment of sex offenders in prisons for the insane. A similar panic occurred in 1950 after the particularly gruesome sexual assault and murder of a child in California (Finkelhor 1979).

From Panic to Backlash:
The Role of Claims-Makers

Eventually, the nature of this latest period of intense interest in child sexual abuse began to change when an active movement of "claims-makers" (Kitsuse and Spector 1973; Spector and Kitsuse 1977) began to argue that child sexual abuse, however widely perceived as evidence of moral decay, was vastly exaggerated. This effort to reconstruct the problem, which began almost as soon as the first cases were reported, included those arguing that many innocent people were being unjustly accused (Eberle and Eberle 1986; Spiegel 1986), social researchers claiming that the incidence of such abuse was vastly exaggerated (Besharov 1985), and those making the controversial claim that children were not necessarily hurt by sexual contact with adults (Schultz 1982). In 1987 many newspapers reported the conclusion of the previously cited study (Finkelhor, Williams, and Burns 1988) that the focus on day-care abuse had obscured the extent to which children are actually at much greater risk of such abuse in their homes.

Others sharing this perspective included two of the defendants acquitted in

the Jordan case, Robert and Lois Bentz, who formed VOCAL (Victims of Child Abuse Laws) and helped create 100 chapters in 40 states. This movement, characterized by the author of a recent book on the period as a "backlash" (Hechler 1989), claimed that legitimate concern over a serious problem had been transformed into a witch-hunt.

Child sexual abuse did not disappear from local or national news media. In 1988, Margaret Kelly Michaels, a former pre-school teacher, was convicted of sexually abusing 19 children at a day care center in Maplewood, New Jersey. In mid-1990, two lengthy articles were published in national publications proclaiming Ms. Michaels's innocence (Nathan 1990; Rabinowitz 1990) and in July, 1993, she was freed when an appellate court found that the testimony of the alleged child victims, which the judge allowed to be videotaped in his chambers, represented a violation of her constitutional rights under the sixth amendment. In November, 1994 New Jersey prosecutors chose not to retry Ms. Michaels. For the most part, however, stories about abuse in day-care centers are rare. While stories about recovered memories of childhood abuse and sexual abuse by priests would begin to appear in the late 1980s, the "mushrooming scandal" of sexual abuse in day-care (New York Daily News: August 11, 1984) had all but disappeared from local and national media by 1989.

Deviance and the Mass Media: The Social Construction of a Moral Panic

Several related trends in the sociological literature of deviance, social

problems, and the mass media have contributed to an understanding of the construction of social problems. Sociologists of social problems (Blumer 1971; Kitsuse and Spector 1973; Mauss 1975; Spector and Kitsuse 1977) have focused on the claims-making activities of groups and individuals who seek to define certain conditions as troublesome problems. The related societal reaction (or labelling) perspective in deviance theory (Becker 1963; Cohen 1972; Erikson 1962, 1966; Kitsuse 1962; Lemert 1967, 1974) has been concerned with the process by which so-called "moral entrepreneurs" and others work to define acts and actors as deviant. Sociologists of the mass media (Fishman 1980, 1981; Gans 1979; Roshco 1975; Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1972, 1978) have looked at how the bureaucratic routines of journalists lead some occurrences (often forms of social disorder or crime) to be selected and defined as newsworthy and others to escape public scrutiny.

The assumption of this work is that actors and acts do not come to be defined as problems because they are intrinsically deviant. Rather, conditions become problems because of the work that people do, often through the mass media, to define them as such. Whether looking at the definitional activities of journalists, official institutions, or moral entrepreneurs, these three related theoretical perspectives have made important contributions to our understanding of how conditions come to be defined as social problems.

Sometimes, however, as was the case with child sexual abuse, a form of deviance seems to emerge so suddenly -- perhaps as a result of a dramatic and

widely publicized incident -- that routine crime and deviance news is swiftly overshadowed by a tidal wave of public revulsion against a newly discovered threat to the social order. Existing news themes are quickly cast aside as journalists scurry to report on examples of the threat. Newly detected incidents are seen as confirmation that the threat is spreading. Politicians and bureaucrats rush to activate the machinery of social control. And eventually, when the threat begins to recede from the public agenda, society is left with a legacy of labeled deviants, new laws and public policies, and people who -- as willing or unwilling participants in the episode -- find that their lives have been changed forever. The two key works that describe these episodes are Stanley Cohen's Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972) and Kai Erikson's Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance (1966).

Stanley Cohen, in his landmark study of English mods and rockers, uses the term "moral panic" to characterize these episodes. He describes a sequence in which society is exposed to signs of approaching disaster (warning), the disaster strikes in the form of some dramatic deviant act (impact), those affected try to understand the meaning of the disaster (inventory), and, finally, groups and individuals forcefully respond to the threat with proposals for various forms of social control (reaction). He is not uninterested in the causes of deviant behavior, but -- given his theoretical reliance on the labelling approach to deviance -- is more concerned with the societal reaction. Following Becker (1963), he concludes that acts come to be

defined as deviant because moral entrepreneurs, journalists, and others are able to successfully apply that label. He assigns a key role to the mass media in this process of labelling and social control, and sees the language and images of news accounts as important channels of information about deviant behavior and its consequences. "Eventually," he writes, "the panic passes over and it is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself" (1972:9).

Erikson shares this concern with the process of defining acts and actors as deviant. In his study of "crime waves" in 17th century New England, he examines how Puritan society held visible public hangings, trials, and jail visits to regulate the passage of actors in and out of deviant roles. He also clearly shares the perspective of the labelling theorists (Becker 1963; Kitsuse 1962; Lemert 1967, 1974) that deviance, rather than being inherent in any behavior, is a property that is conferred by those who come in contact with it. Yet if he shares Cohen's interest in labelling procedures, he goes further and asks why certain procedures were used for this purpose. Here he adopts Durkheim's (1960) view that deviant behavior, far from being a form of social pathology, is a natural and integral part of healthy societies that alerts people to their common interests and cultural identity. He writes: "...morality and immorality meet at the public scaffold and it is during this meeting that the

line between them is drawn (1966:12).

Both Cohen and Erikson note the trauma and social dislocation that mark these episodes, and argue that they function as the social equivalent of natural disasters. Indeed, the study that follows will suggest that these episodes function as virtual moral earthquakes, in which the social seismograph is jolted as each new act of deviance is vigorously identified and harshly punished. Further, in the same way that much has been learned about social structure and organization from studying responses to natural disaster, this study will examine a social disaster as a rich source of data about how we define ourselves, what forms of deviance we most fear, and how we act when we feel that our basic values are fundamentally threatened.

A Case Study of Newswork in a Moral Panic:
The Mountain Valley Day Care Center

This is a case study of news work in a moral panic. Specifically, this study will examine the experiences of a group of newspaper, television, and radio journalists who covered one of the most widely publicized cases of child sexual abuse that occurred between 1983 and 1990. For virtually every day for over three years, the reporters covering this case -- one of the 36 widely publicized cases identified in the Memphis Commercial Appeal series -- were on the front lines of a moral panic, attempting to make sense of a complex and emotional case that profoundly affected the lives of hundreds of people. The focus of this study are these chroniclers of a moral panic, who constructed almost daily news accounts for the larger audience of readers, viewers, and

listeners.

The case took place between 1984 and 1988 in a town that will be called Mountain Valley, a small town in McKinley County.¹ After an initial allegation of sexual abuse by a child at the privately-owned Mountain Valley Day Care Center, law enforcement officials convened an emotional meeting of parents to describe the allegations and to identify possible additional victims. Within the next several weeks, after a number of additional children disclosed their alleged abuse to parents, the center was closed by state social welfare officials. The investigation by local police led to the indictment of the female owner of the center, her son, and her daughter on numerous counts of exhibitionism, fondling, and vaginal and anal intercourse.

For over three years, the Mountain Valley case was covered on almost a daily basis by three newspapers, three television stations, and two radio stations. The three newspapers included the Wilton Times, a prestigious national daily published nearby in the city of Wilton, the Wilton American, a typically sensational tabloid also published in Wilton, and the Mountain Valley Courier, a local daily newspaper with a readership in Mountain Valley and several other nearby towns in McKinley County.

Two vociferous groups were in constant conflict as the case unfolded: Friends and family in the suburban community fiercely proclaimed the

¹ All names of people, places, and media outlets in the Mountain Valley case have been assigned pseudonyms. Chapter IV includes a complete list of these pseudonyms, and introduces the case study's key events and actors.

innocence of the defendants. The children, they argued, had been brainwashed by overzealous therapists, lawyers, and social workers. The friends and families of the alleged victims were just as vocal in their insistence that the children were telling the truth about a horrible violation of trust. One side believed that innocent and loving care-givers, who had dedicated their lives to the well-being of children, were being destroyed by malicious lies. The other side was absolutely convinced that sadistic child molesters had destroyed the innocence of the children attending the school. These already intense emotions were heightened by the fact that the case relied almost exclusively on the children's testimony. All of the parties to the case, including most of the reporters, either believed that the children were telling the truth or were convinced that they were lying.

In the middle of this maelstrom were the reporters, who were closely scrutinized by the prosecution, the defense, and their respective supporters. Both sides believed that their success in court -- and in the larger court of public opinion -- would hinge on the media coverage of the case. Consequently, reporters found that word choices were questioned, alleged bias was vigorously protested, and angry calls of protest were made to editors and publishers. Whether in a courthouse lobby, in the parking lot of a shopping mall, or in anonymous midnight telephone calls, the reporters frequently found themselves being asked to defend their stories. Television reporters, constantly in the public eye, were not unprepared for such relentless scrutiny. Newspaper

reporters, some of whom had previously labored in virtual anonymity, were stunned to find themselves thrust into the limelight. Several were physically threatened, one was assaulted, and another reported a death threat.

Further, the reporters were not immune from some of the same emotional disagreements that were polarizing the community. Indeed, several conflicts erupted between reporters and editors over the case's coverage, and -- even five years after the case had ended -- many were able to vividly recall these painful breeches of the collegiality and consensus that normally governed their work.

The deliberations of the sequestered jury, which took several weeks, set a record for the longest in state history. The jury, which announced its verdict in a tense courtroom packed with friends and family members of both the alleged victims and the defendants, found the three defendants guilty of virtually all the charges. Each received a lengthy prison sentence.

The Research Problem

The basic premise of the case study is that the mass media in general, and journalists in particular, play a central and continuing role in defining deviance and establishing moral boundaries. Further, I suggest that this role is magnified and extended during the periods of extraordinary public alarm that have been referred to as "moral panics" and that journalists are key agents in the definition and construction of such episodes. Using data gathered from the case study, the following broad questions will be asked:

- What has been learned from the extensive literature in the sociology of communications about the organization of routine newswork and the implications of this organization for the resulting news product?
- How does this literature account for the role that journalists might play in the social construction of a moral panic?
- Does the data from the case study support these findings? Does newsgathering in a moral panic simply involve a more aggressive practice of normal journalistic routines?
- Does the involvement of children and the extraordinary stigma attached to acts of sexual abuse affect the nature of newswork during a moral panic?
- How might the unique elements of this case in particular have further affected the way the case was covered?
- Finally, do the findings of the case study suggest any possible modifications in the accepted sociological explanations for the ways that the organization of newswork affects the news product? Do any variables emerge that might not have been adequately considered in the literature?

The work of Cohen and Erikson will be central theoretical tools in the analysis of a moral panic about child sexual abuse. Yet a key question will be posed in the present study that neither work seems to have satisfactorily answered. While Cohen emphasizes that the mass media are involved in the social construction of problems, he doesn't describe in any detail the procedures used by print and broadcast journalists to construct a moral panic. In fact, reporters as active constructors of reality are virtually invisible in Cohen's work. To understand these processes, the relevant literature from the sociology of communication will be applied to the Mountain Valley case study. This work (Fishman 1980, 1981; Gans 1979; Roshco 1975; Sigal 1973;

Tuchman 1972, 1978) considers how the bureaucratic routines of journalists lead some occurrences (often forms of social disorder or crime) to be selected and defined as newsworthy and others to be ignored. Applying Tuchman's (1988:610) proposition that "the content of news is embedded in the processes of its production," the case study will examine in detail the procedures used by journalists to cover a moral panic about child sexual abuse. Some of the more specific questions that follow from this literature are:

- How did reporters actually construct stories about the panic?
- Who did they rely on to serve as what Hall (1981:340) called the "primary definers" of the panic?
- How did they evaluate truth in the absence of corroborating witnesses to private acts of child sexual abuse?
- What either routine or unusual interactions did they have with their editors or publishers as the panic unfolded?
- How might commercial considerations have affected news routines?
- How did reporters interact with other reporters, official sources, moral entrepreneurs, day care staff, alleged offenders, parents, and children attending the center?
- In short, what methods did they use to "routinize the unexpected" (Tuchman 1973) and make sense of the world during a period in which a "new" social problem seemed to be growing so rapidly?

However, an understanding of bureaucratic procedures, which in other studies of newswork has been central, will not be the sole focus of this study. Reporters, indeed workers in any organization, are not simply automatons whose actions can be explained solely by institutional and economic pressures. While their jobs might require the maintenance of at least a veneer of

detachment and ostensible objectivity, or what Tuchman calls "strategic rituals" of objectivity (1972), it is inevitable that less rational, affective motivations also influence professional behavior. This realization has led sociologists to give increasing attention to the influence of emotions and emotional attachments on human behavior (Etzioni 1988). Following from this literature, special attention will be given to how these reporters felt about their participation in such a painful and emotional episode.

- Did their own feelings and emotions, and the bureaucratic and institutional context in which these feelings were formed, affect their work as reporters?
- How did they maintain at least the appearance of objectivity and professional equilibrium in the midst of such a highly charged atmosphere?
- How were their stories affected by the intense emotions engendered by the case?
- Using terms employed by sociologists of emotion, what kind of "feeling rules" and "display rules" guided their behavior during a moral panic and how might the news product have been affected (Ekman 1982, Hochschild 1979).
- Is there any synthesis between this nascent sociology of emotions and moral panic theory that can more fully illuminate these episodes?

An important note about what the study is not: Given its focus on the social construction of moral panics, it will not emphasize the significant body of research dealing with the actual incidence and etiology of child sexual abuse. Neither will the study be concerned with uncovering the objective truth about the Mountain Valley case and the guilt or innocence of the alleged offenders. Aside from the fact that the "truth" about this case remains

extremely elusive for many who have tried to discern it, the subjective emphasis of the present study follows the view that an investigation of the objective aspects of a problem, while important to work in some sub-fields of sociology, is simply not the central purpose of social problems research (Ross and Staines 1972; Spector and Kitsuse 1977; Mauss 1975). Blumer made this point when he wrote that "knowledge of the objective make-up of social problems is essentially useless because ... social problems do not lie in the objective areas to which they point, but in the process of being seen and defined in the society" (1971:305-6).

However, some of these "objective" facts about the Mountain Valley case, or – more aptly stated – facts that were defined as objective by participants, will not be completely irrelevant to the present study. Spector and Kitsuse suggested a role for objective facts within the social constructionist perspective when they argued that:

The balanced view suggests that definitions of social problems may be understood as reactions to conditions that "objectively and verifiably exist." Therefore, the existence of the objective conditions helps explain the societal reaction to them (1977:52).

However, the focus of this study on subjective, rather than objective, truth is not meant to imply that this moral panic can be dismissed as a mass delusion or a hoax. While some in the popular press use the term "moral panic" to suggest that most of the cases were based on fantasy (Nathan 1991), panics can occur about many types of events, including some which can always be verified (hurricanes, floods, etc.) some that are sometimes true

(child abductions, child sexual abuse), and others that are highly unlikely to be true (satanic sacrifices). Cohen and Erikson both suggest that the essence of a moral panic is in the reaction to the perceived threat, not the threat itself.

In fact, this moral panic about child sexual abuse — and the Mountain Valley case in particular — is fascinating to study precisely because the "truth" about child sexual abuse has been so vigorously contested by experts and others. Indeed, the Mountain Valley case took place in that exasperating phenomenological netherworld where, even after years of extensive press coverage and lengthy trials, objective truth remained buried in a thicket of contradictions and vehement disagreements. No piece of completely persuasive evidence beyond the children's testimony emerged to serve as the proverbial smoking gun. The Mountain Valley panic thus became a highly contested ground of deviance-defining activity, providing substantial opportunities for journalists and other claims-makers to enter the fray and offer their version of reality.

This was both an exasperating experience for the journalists and a fundamental challenge to newswriters whose professional ideology places such a high premium on being able to understand and explain any social phenomenon. Consequently, even though the reporters each viewed the Mountain Valley case as among the most memorable of their career, each hoped that they would eventually be able to distance themselves from the emotional roller-coaster of covering such a baffling and painful case. One

reporter remarked:

Well, I can tell you. I never want to cover another case like that. They came to me during the second trial and asked if I wanted to cover it. I said: No way.... I felt like I had been through a war. I felt weary. It was emotionally draining. And I went home at night very depressed. It didn't do great wenders for my private life. I felt so caught up in it. It just absorbed my whole life.

Both the emotional nature of the charges and the painful struggle by the reporters to discover and report truth in this highly charged atmosphere make the Mountain Valley case an excellent opportunity to observe the process of deviance definition in a moral panic.

Description of the General Plan of the Dissertation

Chapter II will introduce social constructionist theory and examine its relevance for the study of deviance, the mass media, and moral panic. After introducing the early constructionist critique of social disorganization theory, which owed much to George Herbert Mead's work on social interaction (1934), the more recent constructionist work of Becker (1966), Blumer (1969), and Spector and Kitsuse (1977) will be examined. Finally, the related development of labeling theory, represented by Becker (1963) and Lemert (1967, 1974), will be discussed as particularly relevant to the study of deviance and moral panics.

Chapter III will examine those periods of extraordinary public alarm when society reacts with particular intensity to a perceived deviant threat. Special attention will be given to the most important attempts to explain these dramatic waves of public alarm. After an examination of Erikson (1966), who is primarily concerned with why society is periodically seized with the need

redefine its moral boundaries, Fishman's attempt to show how this process of redefinition is organized and accomplished will be discussed (1978; 1980; 1981). Finally, Cohen's detailed case study of a moral panic, as well as related work in consensual paradigm theory and cultural studies, will be described (1972). The object will be to use each of the works to guide the analysis of the role of the mass media in the Mountain Valley child sexual abuse case.

Chapter IV will briefly introduce the major events and actors in the Mountain Valley episode and describe the design and methodology of the case study. Special attention will be given to each of the key episodes in the case that especially galvanized the attention of the journalists.

Using Cohen's stages of a moral panic as a framework, Chapters V (warning and impact), VI (inventory), and VII (reaction) will ask: How did the panic get started? How did the key events unfold? How did the panic's participants define and understand the situation? How did stories spread that fueled the panic? Most importantly, what role did the newswriters play in defining, labelling, and controlling deviance during the Mountain Valley moral panic?

Finally, Chapter VIII will summarize the findings and attempt to suggest their significance for theories of deviance, social problems, and the mass media.

Significance of the Study

There is an important reason to more fully understand the dynamics of what an early observer called our "seasons of excitement and recklessness" (Mackay

1841). If journalists are key agents in the definition of deviance and the establishment of moral boundaries during moral panics, what becomes of alternate definitions of deviance that they do not detect and report? If moral entrepreneurs and other claims-makers successfully promote the idea that child sexual abuse occurs primarily in child care settings, how do alternate constructions of reality (parent-child incest, for example) find their way into public discourse? In other words, how might journalistic routines become ideological, or what Smith (1974:3) defines as "a means not to know?"

An understanding of the construction of child sexual abuse in a moral panic will help explain how, as Tuchman states, news "prevents the realization of the Enlightenment model of free speech and public governance by preventing the ascertainment of truths about contemporary society, by limiting access to ideas" (1980:180).

CHAPTER II

SOCIAL PROBLEMS, DEVIANCE, AND THE MASS MEDIA RELEVANT THEORY AND RESEARCH

Periods of extraordinary public alarm, in which some form of deviant behavior comes to be seen as an urgent social problem requiring swift and forceful social control, have been widely discussed in the sociological literature. This chapter will review the relevant literature in the sociology of social problems, deviance theory, and the sociology of news and journalism that has examined the central role played by the mass media in shaping and defining social problems and deviant behavior. As this review will demonstrate, media coverage of deviance and disorder is an important way that society publicizes unacceptable behavior and establishes moral boundaries.

The Sociology of Social Problems

Social problems are ubiquitous in daily life. Virtually every day we read about them in newspapers, see them depicted on television, and experience them in our own lives. In fact, in even our most personal discourse, we often find ourselves complaining that some relatively private annoyance should be seen as evidence of a greater public problem: As we wait impatiently on a crowded subway platform, a late train becomes evidence of a crumbling transit system. Our impatience with a stubborn child leads us to complain about the

decline of respect for authority. A broken toaster comes to represent America's failure to produce quality goods. As Tocqueville (1964:58) observed, when he described the United States as a place where "all public authority and private energy are turned toward internal improvements," Americans devote enormous time and energy to identifying problems, arguing about them, and proposing solutions.

Further, we often find substantial consensus in public opinion about which problems are seen as the most serious threats to the social order. By September, 1989, for example, 64% of all Americans thought that drugs were the nation's leading problem (Goode 1989). This is not to say that opinion polls reveal a similar agreement about appropriate remedies. Neither do all social and economic groups express comparable concern about a given social problem. Further, this consensus often only lasts until a "new" problem comes to dominate the public agenda. At any given time, however, most Americans are able to cite one or two problems that are perceived to be the major menaces to our health and safety.

However, it is precisely this taken for granted nature of social problems that tends to hide even more basic questions: How and why do some private conditions come to be seen as social problems? Why do some of these problems generate even more public concern and eventually come to be seen as fundamental threats to the social order? And why do other conditions seem to linger on the margins of the public agenda, virtually ignored, while

dedicated advocates desperately try to capture public attention?

Virtually no one, for example, would disagree with the proposition that children's neuro-muscular diseases are a serious social problem. Yet how and why do diseases like muscular dystrophy, widely publicized on nationally broadcast telethons, capture the public imagination while other serious children's illnesses -- spina bifida, for example -- remain virtually invisible? How did family violence become the focus of media attention and public policy in recent years? And, given the focus of this study, how and why did the physical maltreatment and sexual abuse of children, phenomena that Aries (1962) and others have traced to the middle ages, become such widely publicized issues in recent decades? In short, how and why does an essentially private condition come to be widely viewed as a serious social problem in a particular social context? The most important attempt to answer these questions has been the constructionist theory of social problems.

Social Constructionist Theory: Early Manifestations

The prevailing sociological view in the 1920s was that social problems were objective conditions that, as John Gillen stated, "prevent the smooth working of our social organization" (Fuller 1938:427). This view -- referred to as social disorganization theory -- held that society exists in peaceful equilibrium until it is thrust into a state of disorganization by some objectively problematic condition. Pfohl provided a useful summary of this theory:

Disorganizational theorists developed a model of naturalistic social causation. Deviance was viewed as a natural by-product of rapid social change. High rates of non-conformity occurred when too much change in too short a time disrupted the normative order of society. The disorganization perspective views society as a collectivity of people bound together by a set of interrelated rules or norms. (1985:135)

Social disorganization theory had itself been an attempt to move beyond earlier work that also viewed social problems as objective conditions. This work, represented by Albion Small and others, argued that the goal of the sociological enterprise was the deduction of natural laws that could explain and facilitate social reform. In this optimistic formulation, the elimination of objective social problems was seen as a virtually inevitable result of progressive social evolution (Small 1907).

Then, as early as the 1920s, a new, distinctly subjectivist, perspective about the nature of social problems began to appear in the sociological literature. This view (Case 1924; Fuller 1938; Fuller and Myers 1941; Waller 1936) posed a fundamental challenge to social disorganization theory and earlier work. Those advancing this new perspective asked what they argued was a logically prior question: Who decides that a condition is a problem in the first place? Their simple answer was that conditions become problems -- not because of their objectively problematic nature or the social disorganization they cause -- but because individuals or groups decide to identify them as such.

This early critique of the objectivist position owed much to the work of George Herbert Mead, who described the extent to which the mind, the self,

and society are largely sustained through the process of social interaction (1934). Later, Mead's focus on social interaction would provide the inspiration for much of the work of symbolic interactionists like Blumer (1969) and Kuhn (1964), who examined how people in interactive situations create meaning and collectively define reality. Certainly Mead's influence could be seen in the earliest manifestations of social constructionist theory.

Case (1924) presented one of the earliest statements of the constructionist perspective:

A social problem means any social situation which attracts the attention of a considerable number of competent observers within a society, and appeals to them as calling for readjustment or remedy by social, i.e., collective action of some kind or another....That is to say, a "social problem" is not a purely objective situation, which can be recognized by a stranger, no matter how proficient in the social sciences....A social "problem" is partly a state of the social mind, and hence not purely a matter of unfavorable objective conditions in the physical or social environment. (1924:269)

This perspective, and its challenge to social disorganization theory, culminated in the work of Fuller and Myers (1941). Rejecting the idea that any condition is inherently problematic, they argued that problems have no existence independent of the activities of those who feel, and act, as if the condition represents a genuine threat to their welfare. Proposing a "value-conflict" theory, Fuller and Myers suggested that "it is not enough that people are being or will be affected by objective conditions. Their behavior must indicate that they think the condition threatens cherished values" (1941:25).

These early statements calling our attention to the subjective nature of social problems were influential, but they did not dominate the discussion about social

problems during the next several decades. Rather, as Ben-Yehuda notes, this perspective was "overpowered by the tidal wave of positivism" represented by the functionalist theory of social problems (1990:38).

The functionalist view, stated most authoritatively by Merton and Nisbet (1971), is that some objectively verifiable conditions are dysfunctional because they represent "inadequacies in meeting one or more of the functional requirements of the system" (1971:820). In the functionalist formulation, the role of the sociologist is to define the system, suggest its functional requirements, and objectively verify dysfunctions.

In the 1970s, however, the subjective emphasis of the earlier value-conflict theorists was resurrected when a number of sociologists launched a major assault on the functionalist perspective. Skeptical of any formulation that did not account for the powerful role played by those with the power to define conditions as objective, these theorists argued that conditions only become problems when actors successfully define them as such. What followed were several influential attempts to establish a distinct sociological theory of the process by which problems are socially defined.

Social Constructionist Theory: The Resurgence of Subjectivism

From the start, the social constructionist debate centered on the extent to which a distinct theory of social problems should incorporate the notion of objective conditions. In other words, how concerned should sociologists be

with determining the ostensibly objective facts about problems? Becker (1966), also strongly influenced by the symbolic interactionists, offered one of the first contributions. Recalling the original value-conflict work of Fuller and Myers, he suggested that an objectively problematic condition does not itself create, nor constitute, a social problem. Like others advocating the subjective approach, he stated that "social problems are what people think they are" (1966:6). Yet, while he took the sociology of social problems in a new direction, he remained anchored in the objectivist tradition:

If any set of objective conditions, even nonexistent ones, can be defined as a social problem, it is clear that the conditions themselves do not either produce the problem, or constitute a necessary component of it. Why must we include them in our conception of social problems? We include them because the definition of most refers to an area of social life that objectively and verifiably exists. (1966:6)

In Becker's view, these objective conditions may not themselves be enough to constitute a problem, but they can be identified and verified by a competent researcher.

Blumer (1971) moved closer to a fully constructionist theory. Drawing on his extensive contributions to symbolic interaction theory, he argued that most sociologists, by trying to identify the objective causes of widely publicized problems, fail to address the more basic question of why some harmful conditions never come to be seen as serious social problems. Arguing against this emphasis on objective conditions, he wrote:

Knowledge of the objective make-up of social problems is essentially useless because ...social problems do not lie in the objective areas to which

they point, but in the process of being seen and defined in the society."
(1971:305-6)

His use of the word "process" was a further subtle shift in the emerging constructionist perspective. The appropriate object of the sociologist's gaze, he suggested, was not the problem, but the process of problem definition. This meant that, while a police officer might count the number of robberies committed in a certain neighborhood, a sociologist would avoid mere record-keeping and ask why the officer was counting certain crimes and how he or she decided to classify them as robberies. However, like Becker, Blumer left room for the "objective make-up of social problems" (1971:305-6) and was not willing to make the leap to a fully constructionist formulation.

Social Constructionist Theory: The Seminal Statement

These tentative steps ultimately led to Spector and Kitsuse's Constructing Social Problems (1977), the seminal statement of the constructionist movement. This influential work proposed a sociology of social problems that was a clear departure from the notion that problems are objective conditions. In fact, the authors even distanced themselves from Becker (1966) and Blumer (1971), who they criticized for their continued reliance on the positivist notion of objective conditions as a "corrective for ignorance and information" (Becker 1971:305). These predecessors had led the way, they argued, but had not completed the task of developing a distinctly sociological theory. Rather, Spector and Kitsuse suggested that the process of definition was itself the

problem:

Our definition of social problems focuses on the process by which members of a society define a putative condition as a social problem. Thus, we define social problems as the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions. The emergence of a social problem is contingent upon the organization of the activities asserting the need for eradicating, ameliorating, or otherwise changing some condition. The central problem for a theory of social problems is to account for the emergence, nature, and maintenance of claims-making and responding activities. (1977:75-6)

Unlike all the previously cited work, Spector and Kitsuse (1977) suggested that definitional or claims-making activities do not lead to the problem but are the problem. They went on to suggest that, by making claims about objective conditions, Merton and others themselves become claims-makers who constitute part of the problem. With this formulation, the break with both the functionalist and value-conflict perspectives was complete.

It is important to note that, in developing a distinct social problems theory that focused only on definitional activities, Spector and Kitsuse were not suggesting that problems have no existence in objective reality. Rather, they were arguing that any finding by an expert about the nature of that reality, regardless of its seeming veracity, is as much a potentially problematic claim as those made by any other interested party. Expertise, in other words, does not guarantee that a claim is either objective or free of implicit ideological stances.

Further, even Spector and Kitsuse made provisions for objective conditions in their formulation. However, these conditions were not seen as part of the

problem, which is composed of the activities of claims-makers, but simply as conditions that help explain the nature of the subsequent social reaction to a putative problem. No claim about an allegedly dysfunctional condition, Spector and Kitsuse argued, can be cloaked in the mantle of objectivity. To even try to do so immediately places the supposedly disinterested expert in the role of claims-maker. The only approach that avoids this dilemma is one in which the sociologist's task is limited to explaining "how such claims and definitions are created, documented, pressed, and kept alive" (Schneider 1985:212). In other words, the only useful sociology of social problems avoids the ultimately fruitless and elusive task of trying to be objective.

The work of Spector and Kitsuse has spawned two major variants. Strict constructionists consider objective conditions to be irrelevant to the development of social problems theory. All claims, even those touted as empirically based, are socially constructed and defined. Woolgar and Pawluch stimulated much debate when they argued this position in an influential 1985 paper entitled "Ontological Gerrymandering: The Anatomy of Social Problems Explanations." Even the ostensibly objective claims of positivist science, they suggested, are no more inherently objective, and no less socially constructed, than any other claim. (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985).

Another variant is what has come to be called contextual constructionism. Represented by Best (1989) and Pfohl (1977), these constructionists still focus primarily on claims-making activity, but do not dismiss the search for

objective conditions as inherently flawed by subjectivity. Rather, they argue that experts can assess objective conditions, and that these conditions can be contrasted with constructed reality. The truth and accuracy of claims, in other words, becomes part of the social problems project.

Both strict and contextual constructionists have contributed to an extensive body of work examining claims about specific social problems and attempting to account for the emergence of claims about specific social problems. These included the 1960's antiwar movement (Gitlin 1980), drinking and driving (Gusfield 1981), rape (Rose 1977), wife-battering (Tierney 1982), gay rights (Cohn and Gallagher 1984), and child abuse (Gelles 1975; Nelson 1984; Pfohl 1977). The central assumption of much of this work has been that problems are socially defined and do not, as Gusfield states, "spring up full-blown and announced, into the consciousness of bystanders" (1981:3).

A Recent Extension of Social Constructionist Theory: The Notion of Secondary Claims-Making

One recent attempt to extend constructionist theory provides an especially useful tool for the analysis of episodes of public alarm. Best (1989) has suggested that primary claims by groups and individuals must be distinguished from secondary claims in the mass media. While an individual claims-maker might, for example, make a speech about an alleged threat to the public welfare, the mass media - if they pay any attention at all to the speech - will almost certainly not replay it in its entirety. Rather, the primary claim will be

shaped and transformed as it moves through the bureaucratically organized environment in which journalists work (Fishman 1980; Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978). Best suggests that "the media do not merely transmit claims, they translate and transform them. The media are secondary claims-makers" (1990:260).

Best has applied this important distinction in several works analyzing the rhetoric of secondary-claims in the mass media about threats to children (Best 1987, 1988, 1989; Best and Horiuchi 1985). This work, however, focuses almost exclusively on the claims as they were printed and broadcast and does not attempt to explain the procedures used by journalists to shape them.

Societal Reaction Theory of Deviance

Thus far, it has been suggested that groups and individuals engage in primary claims-making about putative social problems, and that the mass media - as they shape and transform these claims - engage in secondary claims-making. But what kinds of social problems are the typical subjects of claims-making? A glance at any newspaper or television news broadcast reveals that claims often describe deviant behavior seen to constitute a threat to the social and moral order.

Just before the constructionist theory began to gain influence, many of the same sociologists had begun to explore how the subjectivist stance could be applied to an analysis of deviant behavior. The result was the societal reaction (or labeling) theory of deviance (Becker 1963; Cohen 1972; Erikson 1962;

Kitsuse 1962; Lemert 1967, 1974). Perhaps even more than the constructionist theory of social problems, societal reaction theory provided an important theoretical basis for the subsequent work on episodes of public alarm by Cohen, Erikson, and Fishman.

Societal reaction theory is concerned with the process by which so-called "moral entrepreneurs" and other claims-makers work to define acts and actors as deviant. The central assumption is that actors and acts are not deviant because of any intrinsic quality they possess. Rather, they come to be seen as deviant because other actors, often using the mass media to transmit claims, are able to successfully define them as such. As Becker wrote in Outsiders, one of the most influential statements of the theory:

...deviance is created by society. I do not mean this in the way that it is ordinarily understood, in which the causes of deviance are located in the social situation of the deviant or in social factors which prompt his action. I mean, rather, that social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular persons and labeling them as outsiders... deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'. (1963:9)

Sagarin (1975) points out that this perspective on deviance, while gaining widespread attention with Becker's work, had many early antecedents. Tannenbaum wrote about the process of tagging in which "the person becomes the thing he is described as being" (1938:20). Later, Lemert (1951) -- in a further refinement of the concept -- described what he called "secondary deviance," or subsequent deviant behavior that conforms to the label that has been applied.

This point of view has had an enormous impact on the study of deviance. By 1975, the major annual review of deviance research concluded that " ...the idea that some acts are inherently deviant has been alien to sociology for several decades" (Gibbs and Erickson 1975:21). However, some observers were less willing to grant it axiomatic status. Mankoff (1971) questioned the tendency of labeling theorists to uncritically apply the theory to all forms of deviant behavior. Means (1969) asked whether the theory's cultural relativism left any room for acts that were intrinsically evil. Sagarin (1975) argued that labeling theory tended to deny the responsibility of the individual for his or her acts. Yet, despite these perceptive criticisms, the concept of deviance as socially defined remains a cornerstone of sociological theory.

But the labeling approach raised yet other related questions: Why, at given points in time, does society seem to have an especially urgent need to label certain acts as deviant? Does this process occur spontaneously or within a specific social context? What procedures are developed and used by the mass media and other institutions to used to apply labels? The next chapter will examine the relevant literature of crime waves and moral panics, periods in which society reacts with particular intensity to a perceived deviant threat.

CHAPTER III

PERIODS OF EXTRAORDINARY PUBLIC ALARM: CRIME WAVES AND MORAL PANICS

Claims about social reality are routine in daily life: Whether writing a letter to the editor, gathering signatures on a petition, or simply expressing anger about a public issue, people often find themselves making claims about social problems. Occasionally, legitimate authorities attend to these routine claims, the mass media pays attention, and a condition comes to be defined as a public problem. On other occasions, a claims-maker is unable to convince anyone that his or her relatively private condition should be considered a public problem.

Sometimes, however, a form of deviance seems to emerge so suddenly -- perhaps as a result of a dramatic and widely publicized incident -- that routine news is swiftly overshadowed by a tidal wave of public revulsion against a newly discovered threat to the social order. Existing news themes are quickly cast aside as journalists scurry to report on examples of the threat. Newly detected incidents are seen as confirmation that the threat is spreading. Politicians and bureaucrats rush to activate the machinery of social control. And eventually, when the threat begins to recede from our collective memory, we find ourselves left with a legacy of labeled deviants, new laws and public

policies, and people who -- as willing or unwilling participants in the episode -- find that their lives have been changed forever.

This chapter will review the most important attempts to explain these dramatic waves of public alarm. These are Erikson's Wayward Puritans (1966), Cohen's Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972) and Fishman's work on crime waves (1978; 1980; 1981). How does each author answer the questions that are most relevant to the present study: Why is society periodically seized by these episodes? What, exactly, is the role of the mass media in the social construction of public alarm? After an examination of Erikson, who is primarily concerned with why society is periodically seized with the need to redefine its moral boundaries, Fishman's attempt to show how this process of redefinition is organized and accomplished will be discussed. Finally, Cohen's detailed case study of a moral panic, which attempts to answer both kinds of questions, will be described. The object will be to use each of the works to guide the analysis of the role of the mass media in the Mountain Valley child sexual abuse case.

Crime Waves and the Definition of Moral Boundaries: Witchcraft and Other Deviance in the Massachusetts Bay Colony

Erikson (1966), in his study of 17th century New England, examines how Puritan society, through "crime waves" and subsequent public trials, regulated the passage of actors in and out of deviant roles. He shares the perspective of the labeling theorists (Becker 1963; Kitsuse 1962; Lemert 1967, 1974) that

deviance, rather than being inherent in any behavior, is a property that is conferred by those who come in contact with it.

Yet Erikson's key contribution was to go beyond simple labeling theory and raise what he argues is an even more basic question: Why, at a given point in time, does a society need to respond so swiftly and forcefully to a perceived threat? What structural and historical factors create a fertile ground for the social definition of an act as deviant or an actor as a folk devil?

To answer these questions, he adopts the classic Durkheimian formulation of crime as "normal" (1960). Durkheim argued that deviant behavior, far from being a form of social pathology, actually maintains the viability of a social system by providing visible reminders of unacceptable violations of social norms. These visible reminders not only warn prospective deviants of the consequences of their actions, but, as Erikson writes, create:

... a sense of mutuality among the people of a community by supplying a focus for group feeling. Like a war, a flood, or some other emergency, deviance makes people alert to the interests that they share in common and draws attention to those values which constitute the 'collective conscience' of the community. (Erikson 1966:4)

The result, Erikson suggests, is that most members of society come to share strong convictions that some forms of deviance are immoral, while other members -- publicly identified as either deviant or as sympathetic to the deviant -- are placed outside this community of shared values.

Erikson also was struck by the unusual intensity of the deviance defining activity in Massachusetts. Why, he wondered, did Puritan society have an

especially acute need to draw the boundaries between deviant and normal behavior? His explanation is what he calls a "boundary crisis," an episode that occurred, as Fishman has written in a recent review of Erikson's work,

... during or shortly after periods when the community found itself in uncharted normative waters: when people feared that they or others might be losing sight of cherished goals, when what it meant to be a member in good standing of the community was becoming unclear ... Crime waves are useful for resolving such 'collective identity crises.' (1989:6)

Erikson argues that the labeling and social control of deviants was particularly well suited to the social climate in which the Puritans lived. Originally isolated from outsiders, these residents of a self-proclaimed "city upon a hill" confronted a series of challenges to social and geographic stability. Other religious groups, notably the Quakers, began to vigorously question the intolerance of the Puritans. Long respected Puritan clerical leaders were replaced by a more impersonal bureaucracy. And finally, as religious freedom grew in England, and the need for a tolerant refuge in the new world lessened, the flow of funds and immigrants to the Massachusetts colony ended. As Erikson notes:

The trouble was that the colony had lost its main reason for existing. The saints had come to the new world to provide an object lesson for the rest of mankind, and when the English Puritans lost interest in the model which Massachusetts had offered for their instruction, the whole project seemed a little pointless...(1966:112-113)

What, Erikson then asks, does a society do when it loses its "main reason for existing?" The response of the Massachusetts colony, he suggests, was to focus on external and internal threats, real and imagined, and constitute them

as the cause of the deteriorating social fabric. Crime waves, in which "witches" were identified and publicly prosecuted, emerged as desperate attempts to close ranks in the face of serious threats to the structure of Puritan society.

This emphasis on explaining the social, cultural, and historical context of a boundary crisis is the main contribution of Erikson's analysis. He argues persuasively that, while crime may be "normal" in a social system, crime waves are extraordinary episodes that occur when a system is seized by collective anxiety and uncertainty about appropriate moral boundaries. Yet, while he demonstrates that this anxiety results in individual deviants being moved "in and out of provisional deviant roles," (1966:29) no adequate explanation is provided for how such a crime wave gets started. Neither does he closely examine the deviance defining activities of the actors at the center of the crime wave. People, he seems to suggest, are simply exposed to a society's culture, sense confusion over moral boundaries, and spontaneously join in a collective effort to find the deviant culprits. He does not explain the procedures used by powerful individuals and institutions to generate and push the wave forward.

However, while the mechanisms of crime waves were left for others to adequately explain, Erikson -- in a widely quoted passage -- leaves no doubt about the modern institution that he sees playing a leading role in publicly defining deviant behavior and its consequences:

Today, of course, we no longer parade deviants in the town square or expose them to the carnival atmosphere of a Tyburn, but is interesting that the "reform" which brought about this change in penal practice coincided almost exactly with the development of newspapers as a medium of mass information. Perhaps this is no more than an accident of history, but it is nonetheless true that newspapers (and now radio and television) offer the same kind of entertainment as public hangings or a Sunday visit to the local gaol... morality and immorality meet at the public scaffold and it is during this meeting that the line between them is drawn. (1966:12)

In other words, our modern "public scaffold", at which deviance will be defined and deviants visibly punished, is to be the mass media. Yet despite this tantalizing hint at the role that the mass media would come to play in more contemporary waves of deviance definition, Erikson does not answer a key question: How and why does the mass media decide to select and publicize a specific threat? Why does one threat galvanize the attention of editors and reporters while others seem to interest no one other than the lonely claims-maker?

Fishman's examination of a crime wave against the elderly remains the most important attempt to answer these questions. However, it is important to first call attention to the larger developments in the study of the social organization of newswork that provided the theoretical framework for Fishman's work.

Moving Beyond the "Gatekeeper Studies: Studies in the Social Organization of Newswork

From its earliest formulations, the constructionist perspective has assigned a key role to the mass media in the construction of social problems. Fuller

and Myers (1941), in their fascinating case study of how depression-era trailer camps came to be defined as a social problem, could not ignore the coverage that this problem received in Detroit newspapers. Yet, while virtually every subsequent study has described and classified the content of media claims about social problems, the active role played by the mass media in processing, transforming, and publicizing these claims has only recently been examined. In fact, as Best (1989) has pointed out, some observers have seemed to imply that the mass media serve simply as passive channels for the transmission of claims made by other, more influential parties.

It has remained for another group of sociologists to more closely examine the social organization of newswork and show how the work of deviance definition is actually accomplished (Fishman 1980, 1981; Gans 1979; Roshco 1975; Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1972, 1978). Inherent in this work is the belief that the resulting definitions are a product of the organizational context of newswork.

The study of news processes is not a recent phenomenon. Schudson (1989) points to a number of early studies of newspapers that asked how and why certain stories are selected and published (Hughes 1940; Park 1923). However, the most recent body of work on mass media processes had its origins in the so-called "gatekeeper" studies of the 1950s (Gieber 1964; White 1950). These studies assigned a key role to the subjective judgement exercised by editors who have the power to decide which stories will pass through the

"gate." Individual judgement is seen as the key independent variable in news decision-making.

However, almost as quickly as the "gatekeeper" idea gained a foothold, others -- less satisfied with the emphasis on individual judgement -- shifted the focus to the bureaucratic organization of news organizations. Fishman (1978, 1980), Gans (1979), Molotch and Lester (1974), and Tuchman (1972, 1978) examined how journalists, working within bureaucratically organized institutions, are active participants in the construction of news.

This line of inquiry opened with an assault on objectivity, a notion that the gatekeeper studies had left largely unexamined. In his social history of the newsgathering process, Schudson (1978) describes how journalists, seeking professional status, began to cite "objectivity" as proof that they knew the difference between truth and what Lippmann (1965) called the "pseudo-environment." Objectivity, Schudson demonstrates, was less an achievable ideal than a means by which journalists claimed professional legitimacy.

Tuchman (1972) also critically examined objectivity and argued that it is actually a "strategic ritual," or set of practices used by journalists use to defend themselves against claims of bias. By visibly adopting these rituals, which include such defensive strategies as printing both sides of an issue and the scrupulous use of quotation marks, journalists can carefully cultivate the appearance of objectivity.

Molotch and Lester (1974), displaying the same skepticism about

objectivity, followed with a typology of news events based on whether an event is planned or unplanned and whether the planners are or are not also the event's promoters. They concluded that influential parties, armed with the power to constitute events, can exert enormous influence over what is supposedly "objective." The objective and verifiable world that journalists often claim to be describing, they suggested, is actually a product of "the practices of those who have the power to determine the experiences of others" (1974:54). The next step was to examine the nature of these practices.

Tuchman (1978) used participant observation to understand these newsgathering practices and examine how they result in some events being reported and others remaining invisible. This led her to compare newsgathering to casting a net, a process in which the "facts" produced by official institutions are caught and transformed into news stories. This transformation occurs when journalists apply widely accepted rules about how to cover a story. These include rules about whether a story is "hard news" or "soft news", how they expect a story will unfold, and how they plan to gather information about the story. Because the resulting official version of events tends to overshadow less legitimate versions of reality, Tuchman argues that news is ideology, defined by Smith as a "means not to know" (1984).

Fishman (1980) was also interested in how the routines of newswriters becomes a "means not to know." Following Tuchman, he sees an almost complete reliance on official sources at every stage of the newsgathering

process. Events are first detected as journalists come in contact with official sources on established "beats." Later, these events are interpreted in the context of what Fishman calls "phase structures", or officially defined expectations of the sequence in which events will unfold. For example, crime stories are typically seen as moving from arrest and arraignment to trial and sentencing. Finally, he shows that, when investigating events and reporting stories, newswriters rely almost completely on official sources to provide reliable information about "what constitutes the facts of the case" (1980:134). The result is that news legitimates the existing political and social order by both publicizing officially defined "facts" and discounting alternate versions of reality. News again becomes a "means not to know."

Much in Tuchman's and Fishman's work will be useful in understanding the activities of the journalists who covered the Mountain Valley Day Care Center case. Yet, given the focus of the present study on newsgathering in times of moral panic, Fishman's widely cited paper on a crime wave against the elderly has special relevance.

Construction of a Crime Wave: The Case of Crime Against the Elderly

The discrepancy between the depiction of crime in news accounts and official statistics has been a widely accepted finding in the sociological literature (Davis 1952; Gorelick 1989; Roshier 1973; Sherizen 1978). For example, auto theft, while rarely mentioned in the press, is virtually epidemic

in official police reports. However, Fishman -- while noting this discrepancy - - wanted to understand more than what he called "the irony of crime waves" (1981a:100). How, he asked, are waves generated and pushed forward? What is the role of the press, the police, and public officials?

Fishman examined a dramatic increase in the coverage of crimes against the elderly in New York City in 1976. Using both participant observation at a television station and content analysis, he asked how individual crime stories are periodically transformed into crime waves. Drawing on his newsgathering research, he looked first to the bureaucratic routines of the crime wave's newswriters.

One of his initial observations was that, in a crowded news environment, reporters and editors constantly face the formidable task of imposing order on a virtually unlimited number of random incidents. One way this is done is by the selection and promotion of news themes, or the presentation of "a specific news event, or a number of such events in terms of some broader concept" (Fishman 1981a:102). For example, a brutal sexual assault, a cheating scandal, and an insider-trading conviction would seem to have little in common. However, a journalist who reports these incidents as evidence of the decline of traditional values, and includes the morally indignant comments of a priest or rabbi, is asking the audience to see the crimes as "an instance of something" (Fishman 1981a:102). Events without obvious connection are suddenly seen as evidence of a newly constructed social problem. Themes, then, are useful

tools of professional journalistic practice that help impose order on disorder.

Some themes last only until a new theme is created. A reporter searching for stories that illustrate the decline of traditional values might, for example, unexpectedly discover a story on the wire about a good samaritan's extraordinary act of courage. Rather than continuing to search for examples of depravity, the reporter might begin to look for stories about selflessness and bravery. Almost instantly, moral resurgence might replace moral decline as the operative news theme.

Other themes, however, have a longer life. News organizations, noticing the successful use of a theme by competitors, might themselves begin to use it as an organizing tool. When this happens, "each use of the theme confirms and justifies its prior uses" (Fishman 1981a:107). In just a few days, a city can find itself drowning in theme-related stories. A crime theme has become a crime wave.

Yet reporters invariably find that a continuous supply of illustrative incidents must be identified if the wave is to last beyond this initial frenzy. Gradually, as the theme is appropriated by other media outlets, the demand for new incidents begins to grow faster than their availability. At this point, law enforcement agencies emerge as ready suppliers of incidents and, occasionally, as self-interested promoters of crime waves.

Most news about crime is gathered and reported to news organizations by the police. One way this is accomplished is by use of the police wire, a

teletype machine in news rooms that receives official reports about criminal incidents (Fishman 1981b). In the midst of a crime wave, the police readily serve up a daily dose of appropriate incidents that they believe will interest the press. However, not all types of crime make it on to the wire. For example, because the police do not typically enforce laws about white-collar crimes, crimes such as price-fixing and political corruption are not typically included. Further, the absence of detail about whether a victim and offender know each other gives the impression that they do not. The result, Fishman suggests, is that "serious crime" is depicted as

... crime on the streets, crime occurring between strangers, crime which brutalizes the weak and defenseless, and crime perpetrated by vicious youths. Such crime exists, but this imagery becomes the only reality of crime which people will take seriously because it is the only reality impressed upon them by the media. And it is the only reality newswriters are able to report continuously as themes in crime, and, periodically, as full-scale crime waves. (1981a:10-11)

The final stage of a crime wave occurs when authorities, unable to ignore the public clamor, begin to offer reactions, indignation, and remedies. These official actions themselves become stories that reporters can use as evidence that the wave is real. At this point, authorities will often try to reconstruct the crime wave as a "social control wave." Rather than continuing to supply the press with stories about deviance, they will attempt to shift attention to remedies for the problem.

Eventually, however, a new theme emerges and captures the attention of the press. And, almost as quickly as the crime wave burst on the scene, it

loses its utility as an organizing tool of newsgathering. An investigative commission will issue its final report, police will return to their previous assignments, and hastily drafted legislation -- introduced only weeks before with such zeal and righteous indignation -- will be quietly withdrawn. The wave is over.

In both his work on crime waves (1981a, 1981b) and more general work on the social organization of newswork (1980), Fishman established that the mass media play a central role in constructing waves of deviance definition. Journalists, working in a competitive news environment that features routine contact with official sources, give preference to the definitions and explanations of deviance favored by these sources. The result is that news provides a continuing commentary on the forms of behavior viewed by legitimate authorities to lie outside acceptable moral boundaries: A story about a traffic fatality will stress the peril of driving while intoxicated. A photograph of a handcuffed tax-evader will remind us of the consequences of dishonesty. As Fishman makes clear, news is an important way that society talks to itself about crime (1989).

A more recent three volume work by Ericson, Baranek, and Chan has also extensively examined the media's role in deviance definition. Using both participant observation and content analysis, and examining both the print and broadcast press, Ericson et al have described the process by which the news media become "central agents in the reproduction of order" (Ericson, Baranek,

and Chan 1987:3). After establishing the pervasiveness of news about crime and deviance, Ericson shows how the organization and production of crime and deviance news – from assignment to the selection and use of sources to the final composition of a story – reinforces and promotes a discourse of social control, in which

...as an active agency of social control, stability and change, news representations provide people with preferred versions and visions of social order, on the basis of which they take action. (Ericson et al 1991:239)

Sometimes, however, the relatively routine process of deviance definition described by Ericson, Baranek, and Chan is supplanted by a tidal wave of public revulsion known as a "moral panic." Moral panics occur when a deviant threat emerges with such force, and with such little overt warning, that routine discourse about right and wrong gives way to a flood of indignation about an unusual breach of normal moral boundaries. Suspending normal rules governing social control, officials rush to crack down on the newly discovered menace.

Cohen's work on moral panic provides perhaps the best explanation of these intense periods of deviance-defining activity. Yet before moving to an analysis of Cohen's work, which will provide the framework for the subsequent analysis of the Mountain Valley case study, it is important to place it within the context of two major developments in the study of media and culture.

Trends in British Research on Media and Culture:
The Consensual Paradigm and Cultural Studies

All of the work discussed thus far – symbolic interaction, social constructionism, and labeling theory – have directed our attention to those with the power to successfully define and label deviance. Sharing this emphasis on the processes of social construction and definition, yet focusing more intently on the implied ideological stances of the message itself, is the so-called "consensual paradigm" developed largely by British theorists (Hall et al 1981; Morley 1981; Young 1981).

Young provided a clear and useful summary of the consensual paradigm:

At the heart the theory states that media operatives use a particular paradigm of reality in order to understand events in the real world. This paradigm, or 'inferential structure', is consensual in its basis. That is, it bifurcates the world into a majority of normal people who are possessed of free will and a deviant minority who are determined by forces beyond their control. (1981:393)

News about deviant threats, presented within a framework that reinforces widely shared conceptions of social order, strengthens this consensus by visibly reporting the most egregious violations. Riots, protests, and other threats to this shared consensus come to be defined as deviant and criminal.

Given the questions asked in this study, perhaps the most relevant work emerging from consensual paradigm theory was done by Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the University of Birmingham. Hall et al (1981) applied Gramsci's concept of "ideological hegemony" to their examination of Britain's 1972 moral panic about "mugging." As defined by Gramsci, hegemony is the

process by which the ruling class maintains power by defining and structuring the terms of public discussion. The ruling class maintains power, not by coercion, but by actively promoting an ideological view of the world in which the power of the ruling class is taken for granted.

Hall sees official sources as key agents of ideological hegemony. By acting as what he called the "primary definers" of social reality, these official sources promote a consensual definition of reality and insure that their "primary interpretation" will guide all subsequent discourse. Hall explained this process:

The important part about the structured relationship between the media and the primary institutional definers is that it permits the institutional definers to establishing the initial definition or primary interpretation of the topic in question. This interpretation then commands the field in all subsequent treatment and sets the terms of reference within which all further coverage or debate takes place. Arguments against a primary interpretation are forced to insert themselves into its definition of what is at issue -- they must begin from this framework of interpretation as their starting-point. (1981:342)

Hall's work is especially important to mention, given that Cohen cited it as the most important extension of his work on moral panic (1980). Cohen argued that Hall's work added an important analysis of the role of state power in the social construction of moral panics. This extension, Cohen suggested, related "the working of the moral panic -- the mobilization of public opinion, the orchestration by the media and public figures of an otherwise inchoate sense of unease -- to overall political shifts" (1980:xxiv). Indeed, much of the subsequent work on moral panic has examined the power of the state -- though what Hall called "primary definers" -- to create a fertile atmosphere for the

emergence of moral panics (Ben-Yehuda 1990).

The notion of ideological hegemony has also been a cornerstone of a the so-called cultural studies approach. This approach, which owed much to Stuart Hall and others in the "Birmingham Group," moved beyond a focus on the mass media to examine how all forms of culture are the terrain on which class, gender, race, and other inequalities are defined and reproduced (Brantlinger 1990; Knight 1982; Turner 1991). This perspective also examines culture as the sphere in which various subordinate groups struggle to resist subordination by the dominant culture. This definition of culture moves beyond the mass media to include a diverse array of social products and practices:

The 'culture' in cultural studies points to the sociologically and anthropologically grounded concerns with the practices and products of human activity. These are seen as both expressive and constitutive of subjectivity. Meaning is seen as socially constructed, and cultural studies is very much directed toward analyzing how it is structured, articulated and circulated in various settings. (Dahlgren 1992:5)

Some of those who analyze newswork from the cultural studies perspective cite their debt to the earlier bureaucratic studies of newswork. These studies of organizational constraints, work routines, and source organizations, Dahlgren argues, were "often demystifying: even when striving to be merely illuminating, its 'constructivist' perspective was often viewed as incompatible with newspeople's own perceptions of how the news gets done" (1992:3). Yet, in two fundamental ways, cultural studies has represented a departure from this earlier work. First, a group of scholars in cultural studies have, in radically altered form, revived the whole question of media effects. No longer

focused on the mass audience, this newer work on reception theory has used ethnographic research to examine how individuals in real-life settings interpret and make sense of the media (Corner et al 1990; Jensen 1986).

Yet the special emphasis of cultural studies that is most relevant to the present study has been the analysis of news as texts. Drawing on work in semiotics and structuralism, and departing from the traditional quantitative analyses of media content, these studies argue that the form and content of texts foster "specific ways of seeing the world, hinder other ways, and even structure specific ways of relating to the text itself" (Dahlgren 1992:13). In this formulation, language -- with its embedded meanings and structures -- becomes the basic raw material of constructed social reality (Hartley 1982). Gorelick's study of tabloid crime coverage followed this linguistic emphasis, and examined the role of apocalyptic language and metaphor in the construction of an ideological newspaper crimefighting campaign (1989). This focus on language will inform the Mountain Valley case study, and will be used to examine how the episode's news accounts helped structure the discussion of child sexual abuse and served to advance the atmosphere of moral panic.

This review now turns to Cohen's work on moral panic, which will provide the framework for the Mountain Valley case study and owes much to all of these traditions -- symbolic interaction, social constructionism, and labeling theory, the consensual paradigm, and cultural studies. How did Cohen

explain these periods of extraordinary public alarm?

Moral Panics:

The Case of the Mods and Rockers

Stanley Cohen's Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972) is the seminal statement on the phenomenon of moral panics. Using the case of youth violence between mods and rockers in England, Cohen described what happens when a form of deviance seems to emerge so suddenly -- perhaps as a result of a dramatic and widely publicized incident -- that routine news is swiftly overshadowed by a tidal wave of public revulsion against a newly discovered threat to the social order. His definition of a moral panic, frequently quoted, remains the classic description of these episodes:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel, and other times it is something that has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic is passed over and is forgotten except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (1972:28)

Like Erikson, Cohen was concerned with the structural and historical factors that create a fertile ground for the social definition of an act as deviant or an actor as a folk devil. Why, in other words, do societies panic? He concludes that moral panics, and the subsequent waves of social control, are

most likely to occur when societies perceive serious external threats to an established system of values. He adopts the classic Durkheimian notion that deviant behavior, far from being a form of social pathology, actually maintains the viability of a social system by providing visible reminders of unacceptable violations of social norms.

In addition to suggesting the theoretical significance of moral panics, Cohen proposes a typical sequence for these episodes. Drawing on research about the social response to natural disasters, he suggests a process in which society is exposed to signs of approaching disaster (warning), the disaster strikes in the form of some dramatic deviant act (impact), those affected try to understand the meaning of the disaster (inventory), and, finally, groups and individuals forcefully respond to the threat with proposals for various forms of social control (reaction). One consequence is that normal rules for dealing with deviant behavior, which might include protections for the accused and various punitive remedies, are deemed to be inadequate to deal with the menace.

What, Cohen also asks, is the social engine that propels these panics and maintains them in a prominent position on the public agenda? Following Becker (1963) and Gusfield (1963), he concludes that much of the deviance defining activity in moral panics occurs because moral entrepreneurs and other crusaders are able to successfully label the threat as a clear and present danger to cherished values. He assigns a key role to the mass media in this process of

labelling and social control and sees the language and images of news accounts as important channels of information about deviant behavior and its consequences. Of special relevance to the present study is the key role played by widely publicized trials in moral panics. These media events serve as visible morality plays that promote the notion that society is cracking down a particularly noxious form of deviance.

Cohen's work will serve as a valuable tool in the analysis of a moral panic about child sexual abuse. Yet, while Cohen emphasizes that the mass media are involved in the social construction of problems, newswriters as active constructors of reality are virtually invisible in his work. This study will argue that the work of journalists is a crucial part of how deviant behavior is identified, labeled, and punished during periods of moral panic.

To understand these processes, the previously described literature from the sociology of communication will be applied to the Mountain Valley case study. This work (Fishman 1980, 1981; Gans 1979; Roshco 1975; Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1972, 1978) -- virtually all of which was done after Cohen's work on moral panic -- considers how the bureaucratic routines of journalists lead some occurrences (often forms of social disorder or crime) to be selected and defined as newsworthy and others to be ignored. Applying Tuchman's (1988:610) proposition that "the content of news is embedded in the processes of its production," the case study will examine in detail the procedures used by the journalists who covered the Mountain Valley case. Given how much has been

learned about the bureaucratic organization of newswork, it is important to expand the understanding of moral panics and explain the complex social and organizational processes that fuel these episodes.

Summary of Research Findings:

Crimes Waves, Moral Panics, and Other Periods of Extraordinary Public Alarm

After discussing the constructionist perspective, which established that conditions only become problems when they are successfully defined as such, the preceding review described how this perspective resulted in the "societal reaction" or "labeling" theory of deviance. The central assumption of this theory is that actors and acts are not deviant because of any intrinsic quality they possess. Rather, they come to be seen as deviant because other actors are able to successfully define them as such.

The review then turned to three key contributions about the role of the mass media in defining and labeling deviant behavior during "crime waves" and "moral panics." Erikson is primarily concerned with why society is periodically seized with the need to redefine its moral boundaries. Fishman reveals how newswriters, interacting with officials, are key agents in the social construction of deviant behavior. Finally, Cohen emphasized how moral panics, and the subsequent waves of social control, are most likely to occur when societies perceive serious external threats to an established system of values. Cohen's work was placed in the context of consensual paradigm theory and cultural studies, two related developments in the study of media and culture.

Together, these contributions provide valuable insights that explain the role of

newspaper, television, and radio reporters in a moral panic. The next chapter will introduce the major events and actors in the Mountain Valley case, and describe the study's design and methodology.

CHAPTER IV

INTRODUCING THE CASE OF THE MOUNTAIN VALLEY DAY-CARE CENTER: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

After a brief description of the major events and actors in the Mountain Valley case, this chapter will describe the case study's design and methodology. This will provide the foundation for an extended discussion in subsequent chapters about how the episode unfolded and the role played by the media in the social construction of a moral panic.

Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center: Introducing The Basic Details of the Case Study

The case took place between 1984 and 1988 in Mountain Valley, a suburb of Wilton, a major American city located in McKinley County. After an initial allegation of sexual abuse by one child at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center, local Mountain Valley law enforcement officials convened an emotional meeting of parents at Mountain Valley Elementary School to describe the allegations and to identify possible additional victims. Within the next several weeks, after a number of additional children disclosed increasingly detailed and shocking allegations of abuse to parents and local law enforcement officials, the Mountain Valley Day Care Center was closed by state social welfare officials. The investigation by Mountain Valley police, and

later by McKinley County prosecutors, led to the indictment of Mary Simpson, the female owner of the center, her son Mark Simpson, and her daughter Valerie Simpson on numerous counts of exhibitionism, fondling, and vaginal and anal intercourse. Some of the allegations involved the anal penetration of children with sticks, scissors, and other objects.

For over three years, the Mountain Valley case was covered on almost a daily basis by three newspapers, three television stations, and two radio stations. The three newspapers included the Wilton Times, a prestigious national daily published several miles away in downtown Wilton, the Wilton American, a typically sensational tabloid also published in Wilton, and the Mountain Valley Courier, a local daily newspaper with a readership in Mountain Valley and several other nearby towns in McKinley County. The three television stations were Wilton affiliates of each of the three major networks -- WDEF (CBS), WGHI (NBC), and (WJKL) ABC. The two radio stations, WMNO and WPQR, were located in Wilton. Thus, all of the coverage of the Mountain Valley case, with the exception of the stories in the local Mountain Valley Courier, originated in the city that will be referred to as Wilton.

Two vociferous and antagonistic groups in Mountain Valley were in constant conflict during the three year period: Friends and family of the Simpson's fiercely and vociferously proclaimed Mary, Mark, and Valerie's innocence. The child victims, they argued, had been brainwashed by

overzealous therapists, lawyers, and social workers. Special targets of their bitterness were Mountain Valley Sheriff Charles Overton, who conducted the initial investigation, McKinley County prosecutor William Hartnett, and virtually all of the reporters from Wilton who came to Mountain Valley to cover the case. Bill and Susan Gordon, friends of the Simpson family, were probably the most vocal supporters, and formed the nucleus of more than two dozen supporters who monitored the case to its conclusion. The Gordon home remained a rallying point for supporters of the accused throughout the case. The Simpsons were represented by Thomas Marshfield, an attorney based in Wilton who was well-known for his handling of a number of high-profile criminal cases.

The friends and families of the alleged victims were just as vocal in their insistence that the children were telling the truth. Their primary advocate was McKinley County District Attorney William Hartnett, who had a reputation as a successful prosecutor of child sexual abuse cases. In addition to the bitterness they felt toward the Simpsons, the victim's supporters also reserved special venom for Bill and Susan Gordon, and for defense attorney Thomas Marshfield.

The polarization of these two camps was extreme, remained so for the next several years, and often escalated into acts of emotional intimidation and physical violence: The Gordon family, and other supporters of the Simpson's, believed that Mary, Mark, and Valerie -- who they saw as innocent and loving

care-givers -- were being destroyed by malicious lies. On the other side, Prosecutor Hartnett, the families of the victims, and their supporters were absolutely convinced that the Simpsons were sadistic child molesters who had destroyed the innocence of the alleged child victims. These already intense emotions were heightened by the fact that the case relied almost exclusively on the children's testimony. All of the parties to the case, including most of the reporters, either believed that the children were telling the truth or were convinced that they were lying. Few expressed any doubt or uncertainty.

Eventually, over a year and a half after the initial allegations, Mark Simpson's trial took place in a McKinley County courtroom before Judge Martin Solway. The deliberations of the sequestered jury took several weeks, and set a record for the longest in McKinley County history. The jury, which announced its verdict in a tense courtroom packed with friends and family members of both the alleged victims and the defendants, found Mark Simpson guilty of virtually all the charges. Several months later, in a separate trial, Mary and Valerie Simpson were tried and also convicted. Their sentences were similarly severe.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Strategy

The case study method -- relying primarily on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with many of the case's participants -- was selected as the most appropriate tool to examine the role of the press in the social construction of a

moral panic in Mountain Valley. As defined by Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg, the case study is "an in-depth, multi-faceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon" (1991:2). Case studies are generally agreed to be more useful in generating new theoretical generalizations about complex social phenomena than in empirically testing existing theoretical propositions (Yin 1984).

The advantages of the case study method make it an especially appropriate for an examination of an extended, complex episode like the moral panic in Mountain Valley. Involving the complex interactions of hundreds of people in both Wilton and Mountain Valley for several years, and covered by a group of newswriters who remained at the vortex of these painful events, the panic that began at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center virtually requires a research methodology that places the construction of social action and meaning *in its natural setting*. A recent defense of the case study method suggests how and why it is especially relevant to the present study:

1. It permits the grounding of concepts and observations about social action and social structures in natural settings studied at close hand.
2. It provides information from a number of sources and over a period of time, thus permitting a more holistic study of complex social networks and of complexes of social action and social meanings.
3. It can furnish discussions of time and history to the study of social life, thereby enabling the investigator to examine continuity and change in life-world patterns.
4. It encourages and facilitates practice, theoretical innovation and generalization. (Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg 1991:2)

A typical criticism of case studies is that their specific, idiosyncratic nature does not yield testable, reliable generalizations. This also, it is suggested, makes them peculiarly vulnerable to the biases and whims of the investigator (Blalock 1970). Yet, if the findings of case studies are interpreted with these shortcomings in mind, and if they are viewed as more exploratory than definitive, they can be a useful tool.

Kai Erikson, in his landmark study of the destruction of a community by the Buffalo Creek flood, anticipated this criticism and offered an eloquent response. Indeed, Erikson's observations on method are unusually applicable to the Mountain Valley study. Moral panics function as the social equivalent of physical disasters, jolting a community as each new act of deviance is vigorously identified and harshly punished. Anticipating criticism that his qualitative study of a natural disaster defied standard sociological convention, Erikson counters that the positivist, quantitative emphasis on generalization sometimes obscures the richness of social life.

The search for generalization has become so intense in our professional ranks that most of the important events of our day have passed without comment in the sociological literature. The aim of any science, I agree, must be to move from particular observations to general findings, but there are times when the need for generalizations must yield to the urgency of passing events, times when the event must tell its own story. Moreover, when one comes to know and respect a community of people, it becomes increasingly difficult to think of them as examples of a larger sociological proposition -- all the more if they are suffering in some sharp and private way. (1976:12-13)

The Mountain Valley panic seems to be precisely the kind of urgent event to which Erikson was referring: It galvanized the attention of a community for

several years. Each of its participants had fascinating, poignant stories to tell. These local stories were rooted in the social strains and anxieties of the larger society. And, as victims of a social disaster, many community members had suffered in a "sharp and private way."

However, Mountain Valley was not the only case that fit Erikson's criteria. It is important to describe how the case originally came to my attention and why it was selected for study.

Site Selection

As previously mentioned, Charlier and Downing identified at least thirty-six cases of ritual child sexual abuse between 1983 and 1987 in day-care or other institutional settings. They defined ritual abuse as "child sexual abuse involving a group of adults molesting children and in which threats are used to keep children from telling what happened" (1988:A1). These thirty-six cases were the original universe from which the site for the present study would be selected. Many allegedly took place in day care centers, but some involved youth organizations and elementary schools. While any of these cases might have theoretically been appropriate, several practical considerations narrowed the possible sites.

First, the site had to be relatively close to the institution at which this study was completed. The widely publicized McMartin case, for example, would have provided a rich source of data, but it was simply not possible to spend an extended period of time in Los Angeles. Second, it was necessary to

select a site at which virtually all of the reporters covering the case -- and many other members of the community -- would be willing to submit to lengthy in-depth interviews. Finally, given the study's special focus on the role of the press, much of the news coverage of the case selected -- especially news clippings -- would have to be available for analysis. Obviously, a number of the cases had to be eliminated.

One of the cases was targeted initially, and exploratory interviews were conducted with reporters and criminal justice professionals. Indeed, the site would have been quite desirable, despite the fact that many of the participants spoke only Spanish. However, the organization administering the day care center eventually decided that, because they had been able to successfully move beyond the traumatic events, they did not want to risk opening old wounds. This happened with a second possible site, with the church in charge of the day care center ordering all employees not to give interviews.

Then, when it seemed the study would have to be abandoned, a letter arrived from an attorney in Wilton. The attorney had been told by a reporter that I was looking for a site and he was writing to tell me about the events at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center. His friend Mark Simpson had been accused of child sexual abuse and he thought that many of the most relevant parties to the case would be willing to discuss these events. Concerned that he might see me as a potential ally in the effort to free Simpson, I informed him that I was interested in the role of the press and not in the guilt or innocence

of the accused. Gordon assured me that he was speaking with anyone who would listen and would be happy to speak with me.

After meeting with Mr. Gordon, and determining that the case was typical of many of the day care sexual abuse cases taking place at the time, I called each of the reporters who had covered the case. When most of them declared themselves willing to be interviewed, the Mountain Valley case was selected as an appropriate site for the study.

Role Management:
Entry, Reciprocity, and Ethics

Given the manner in which the case came to my attention, the issue of role management was especially crucial as the study began. Marshall and Rossman describe this issue and discuss its significance in qualitative research:

Researchers should plan and practice role maintenance...Research designs demonstrate the researcher's awareness about managing impressions that facilitate the research. Researchers then devise roles that elicit cooperation, trust, openness, and acceptance. At times this means play-acting, dressing a certain way, and allowing themselves to be manipulated. Frequently, researchers develop multiple roles to in order to develop research relationships with different people...The researcher cannot simply be a sponge-like observer who soaks up data, as Vidich (1969) explains, since many people will not respond to or trust someone who will not take a stand. (1989:65)

Role management was a special problem in the Mountain Valley case.

Like many child sexual abuse cases relying on children's testimony, the polarization of the community was extreme. Members of the community, including the newswriters, tended to see the children as either sainted vessels of the truth or evil liars. Several years after the interviews had been

completed, this schism remained firmly rooted in the community and virtually no one had changed their point of view. Most continued to express disbelief that anyone could hold a point of view about the case different from their own. Indeed, almost ten years after the initial events, most parties continue to cling to their beliefs about the case.

This schism presented a major problem. Because supporters of the defense had originally contacted me, and because — until I convinced them otherwise — they saw me as a potential convert, I felt in constant danger of being labeled a shill for the defense. Further, when I began to speak with the newswriters and attorney's on the prosecution side, they seemed clearly uneasy that I had spoken with the defense. At every opportunity, I assured the respondents that I was not attempting to determine guilt or innocence. Yet parties on each side continued to see me as a potential convert. Each of them had invested an enormous amount of time and energy in promoting their version of the truth, and whether I felt the Simpsons were guilty or innocent was a matter that concerned them greatly.

This mistrust should not have been so surprising. In times of moral panic, bitterness and polarization is sometimes so extreme that even speaking with someone on one side is seen as a partisan act. In fact, one of the stories to be told in the following account of the Mountain Valley panic concerns a reporter who, simply because he made an effort to write about the defense, was labeled by his colleagues as biased. I often found myself in a similar position.

Managing this situation was difficult. I constantly felt tempted to present myself to one side or the other as favoring their position in order to gain greater access and confidence. Yet, when I saw the good will and deep sincerity with which they spoke with me, I found myself unable to be so blatantly dishonest. Eventually, I settled on a strategy in which I attempted to be empathetic without posing as an ally. I did try to appear open to being convinced that a respondent was right. I was, after all, intensely curious about guilt or innocence. But I remain troubled about those times when I may have crossed over the line and hinted to a respondent that I thought they were right about the case.

Eventually, my role as neutral observer became known to the respondents and other members of the community. For the remainder of the study, however, I remained uncomfortable when the parties attempted to enlist me to one side or the other.

Primary Data Collection:
In-Depth Interviews with the Newswriters

The primary data for the case study were the in-depth interviews that were conducted from October, 1990 to December, 1991 with the ten most prolific newspaper, television, and radio newswriters who covered the Mountain Valley case. Only one of the television reporters who covered the case was available for an interview. Accordingly, the study will primarily focus on the activities of nine print and radio newswriters, with the activities of the lone television reporter entering the account only occasionally.

Several of the subjects required a guarantee of confidentiality before they would reveal unusually personal details. Provided this guarantee, they were willing to reveal details that might have negatively affected their relationships with colleagues and family members. The majority required no such guarantee before revealing comparably sensitive information. However, because the disclosure of any identifying details would violate the agreement made with some of the subjects, the case study will use no real names and will disguise all identifying details. The objective will be to provide enough detail to provide a context for understanding the response of the journalists, while at the same time protecting the anonymity of subjects.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured discussions with each respondent that, while focusing on several key issues, were primarily guided by the respondent's definition of the situation. This approach is endorsed in Marshall and Rossman's text on qualitative research, who suggest that successful in-depth interviews are more like discussions than formal interviews:

Qualitative in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal structured interviews. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant's meaning perspective, but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses. This is, in fact, an assumption central to qualitative research-- the participant's perspective on the social phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it and not as the researcher views it. (1989:82)

As the subsequent chapters on the case study will suggest, this approach proved to be extremely fruitful in examining the events in Mountain Valley.

Indeed, three of the most relevant issues to emerge -- especially regarding the role of emotions in newswork -- were products of this exploratory approach and simply would not have emerged in a more structured interview. The basic questions that were used as a starting point for each interview are included as an appendix to this study.

Primary Data Collection:
Introducing the Interview Subjects

The newsworkers interviewed for this study were in the middle of this maelstrom, and were closely scrutinized by the prosecution, the defense, and their respective supporters. Both sides believed that their success in court -- and in the larger court of public opinion -- would depend on the media coverage of the case. Consequently, reporters found that word choices were questioned, alleged bias was vigorously protested, and angry calls of protest were made to editors and publishers. Whether in a courthouse lobby, in the parking lot of a shopping mall, or in anonymous midnight telephone calls, the reporters frequently found themselves being asked to defend their stories. Television reporters, constantly in the public eye, were not unprepared for such relentless scrutiny. On the other hand, newspaper reporters, some of whom labor in virtual anonymity, were stunned to find themselves thrust into the limelight. Several were physically threatened, one was assaulted, and another reported a death threat. It was not uncommon for the reporters to be alternately vilified and admired, depending on how they were viewed by the parties to the case.

For each of the reporters, the case was among the most memorable, and sometimes painful, of their career. James Redman of the Mountain Valley Courier, who covered the case early in his first year as a reporter, spoke for a number of his colleagues when he described his feelings of emotional and physical exhaustion:

It was emotionally draining and physically exhausting. I really had to white knuckle it. The physical aspect is still quite fresh in my mind. I have talked to other reporters covering child sexual abuse and they relate the same symptoms. Some say they've slept for 15 hours after the verdict. It was a once in a lifetime experience. I'm grateful for the experience. I cringe at some of things I did or didn't do. I probably lost ten pounds. Drank too much coffee.

Further, the reporters described the special difficulty they had at coming to terms with the nature of the allegations. Each spoke of a moment when, no longer able to maintain a semblance of professional distance, they fully realized the nature of the acts that were being described in court and began to suspect that they were true.

Yet, while none of the reporters were immune from these shared visceral reactions, each reacted differently. Some struggled mightily -- and with some success -- to maintain emotional distance, while others were unable to avoid joining the flood of public opinion about the case. Also, while the reporters agreed about the emotional nature of the case, this did not extend to a unanimity about the culpability of the accused. Some, for example, believed from the start that the Simpsons were guilty. Others had strong doubts. On several occasions, this led to difficult disputes between colleagues on the same

newspaper. In other words, the reporters reacted to the case as both newswriters constrained by the bureaucratic routines of a newsgathering organization and as individuals with deeply felt emotions about this highly stressful episode. From this volatile mix of emotions and newsgathering routines emerged the news accounts that were the panic's raw material.

The in-depth interviews -- taped over several lengthy sessions and later transcribed -- were conducted with the following parties in Mountain Valley and in Wilton. Because much more detail about each reporter will be provided in subsequent sections, these descriptions are introductory rather than exhaustive:

Newspaper Reporters

Les Osborn, Reporter, Wilton Times

Les Osborn was the closest thing to a "dean" among the group of reporters covering the Mountain Valley Day Care Center case. A reporter for over twenty years, Osborn had been assigned for several years to the McKinley County Courthouse. As the only one of the reporters with a permanent base in the building where the trial was held, his cramped office became a natural gathering point for his colleagues. Osborn seemed to relish his advantage as a permanent "resident" of the courthouse, and was happy to play the role of a paternal mentor for some of his younger colleagues who were unfamiliar with the McKinley County criminal justice system.

Osborn did not get along well with his colleagues on the Wilton Times.

Some even suggested to me that his assignment at the McKinley County courthouse – which Osborn himself referred to as "Siberia" – was actually a form of banishment from the main newsroom. He frequently disagreed with Paul Paley, the other Wilton Times reporter covering the case, who believed that the Simpsons were innocent.

Paul Paley, Reporter, Wilton Times

The first time I heard about the Mountain Valley Day Care Center case was in a letter I received from an attorney in Wilton who urged that I visit Wilton, learn more about the case, and contact Paul Paley, a reporter for the Wilton Times. Paley, Gordon suggested, was the only reporter covering the Mountain Valley Day Care Center case who believed in the innocence of the Simpsons. After calling Gordon to acknowledge receipt of the letter, I called the Wilton Times newsroom and asked for Paley.

Paley, who presented a deliberate, almost patrician demeanor, was anxious to speak with me and immediately shared his opinion that Mark Simpson was simply not the type who could molest children. He claimed that, as an experienced reporter, he had covered child sexual abuse cases, and Simpson was simply not a child molester.

Yet Paley's belief in Simpson's innocence did not really extend beyond these intuitive hunches about the about what a molester would or would not do. In fact, as his colleagues sarcastically pointed out to me on numerous occasions, Paley had reached this conclusion without actually sitting through

any of the testimony during the Simpson trial. Yet he is quite proud of his position among his colleagues as what he calls the lone "heretic," and he has never wavered from his belief that the Simpsons are innocent.

Sally McDonald, Reporter, Wilton American

After graduating from the Wilton State University, Sally McDonald was hired by the prestigious Wilton Times. Within a year, however, she decided that she preferred the exciting atmosphere of a tabloid and went to work at the Wilton American. When the Mountain Valley case took place, Sally McDonald had been a reporter at the Wilton American for four years.

McDonald, a young and energetic reporter who relishes the competitive aspects of journalism, probably had the highest public profile of any of the reporters covering the Mountain Valley case. As one of the Wilton American's lead crime reporters, her stories about the case were frequently printed on the front page and accompanied by provocative large-type headlines.

McDonald's high profile made her a special target of the family and supporters of the Simpsons. They resented the prominent and sensational coverage given the case in the Wilton American, and were especially angry that McDonald had successfully cultivated some very useful sources in the Mountain Valley Police Department. Consequently, she was often able to report stories about the course of the investigation before specific charges were brought against the Simpsons. At one point, she broke a story about the alleged involvement of the Simpsons in child pornography that was later

determined to be false. But, more than anything, they believed that McDonald had used her pleasant demeanor to mislead them and convince them that she would be fair.

Eventually, the anger toward McDonald escalated and she began to receive threatening phone calls. One day during the trial, walking down a courthouse hallway, McDonald found her path blocked by a supporter of the Simpsons who wanted to discuss the case. By the end of the case, McDonald learned that her life had been threatened.

By the time McDonald was interviewed, she had already left the rough and tumble of daily crime reporting for the more sedate court beat. Our interviews took place in her cramped quarters at the courthouse in Wilton.

Steve Baylor, Reporter, Wilton American

When the trial of Mark Simpson was over, Sally McDonald was asked by Carl Mason, her editor at the Wilton American, if she wanted to cover the trial of Mary and Valerie Simpson. For a variety of reasons, including the stress she experienced and threats to which she was subjected, she declined. Her replacement was Steve Baylor, a colleague who had assisted her on the Mountain Valley case.

Baylor was a funny, loquacious raconteur who, through the frequent use of a razor-sharp sense of humor, kept his colleagues sane when the stress and emotion of the case threatened to be overwhelming. Unlike Osborn, who sometimes joked about the painful and sexually explicit aspects of the case,

Baylor's wit seemed to be grounded in warmth and compassion.

When Baylor was interviewed for this study, he had left the Wilton American and was working in an administrative capacity for McKinley County.

James Redman, Reporter, Mountain Valley Courier

Redman, a young reporter in his first year working for a newspaper, had a unique position in the group. While each of the others covered the case from a base in downtown Wilton, Redman was the only local journalist from Mountain Valley covering the case. His newspaper, the Mountain Valley Courier, was a family-owned daily with offices near the Mountain Valley Day Care Center. He also lived in Mountain Valley, and was casually acquainted with the Simpson family.

This history in the community had, according to Redman, both advantages and disadvantages. More than any of the other reporters, he knew the community, had excellent sources in the Mountain Valley Police Department, and -- as the reporter for a local newspaper -- had an almost unlimited news hole to fill. Consequently, virtually all the stories he wrote were printed in the Mountain Valley Courier with minimal editing. Redman describes it as a heady experience that, early in his first year as a reporter, much more experienced reporters from Wilton were approaching him for information about Mountain Valley.

At the same time, his visibility in Mountain Valley and previous

acquaintance with the Simpsons placed him in a difficult position. Competing reporters began to notice that he was engaging in small talk with Mark Simpson and suspected that he favored the defense. Redman denies any favoritism.

Redman was well liked by his colleagues. Even those who labeled him as a novice sought his advice about Mountain Valley and invited him to join the informal circle of reporters covering the case. Yet, behind his back, these colleagues dismissed him as an inexperienced reporter for a back-water daily who gave excessive play to outlandish claims by the defense.

Three years after the verdict, Redman had left the Mountain Valley Courier and taken a job with a larger daily newspaper.

Radio Reporters

Annette Marshall, Reporter, WMNO-Radio

Annette Marshall was one of two radio reporters who covered the Mountain Valley case from the first allegations to the verdict. The station for which she worked, WMNO-Radio, was the only all-news radio station in Wilton. When the first allegations surfaced about abuse at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center, Marshall had been a radio reporter for almost ten years. Because of the emphasis on breaking news at her station, Marshall was more active covering the trial than the extensive and complex pre-trial investigation.

Marshall's work routine -- especially during each of the two trials -- differed significantly from that of her print colleagues. While newspaper

reporters had the time to listen intently, take copious notes, and file one story each day, Marshall was expected to report on the progress of the trial as many as five times each day. And regardless of when her last report had been filed, she was expected to file again at any time that newsworthy developments occurred. Many, but not all, of these reports were live.

Marshall -- along with Paul Paley of the Wilton Times, James Redman of the Mountain Valley Courier, and Howard Reardon of WDEF-TV -- was one of the reporters who was perceived as fair by the friends and supporter of the Simpsons. They felt that she was willing to listen to their side of the story. Yet eventually Marshall concluded that the defendants were guilty. Like all of her colleagues, with the conspicuous exception of Paul Paley of the Wilton Times, she found it hard to believe that detailed testimony about specific sexual acts could have been fabricated. Marshall was interviewed in the studios of WMNO-Radio.

Carol Jones, Reporter, WPOR-Radio

Carol Jones was the only other radio news reporter to cover the case from the first allegations to the final verdict. While her primary competitor was Annette Marshall of WMNO-Radio, Jones and Marshall became very friendly during the case and often shared information with each other. In fact, Carol was very well-liked by all her colleagues, and -- when several heard from me during the interviews that Carol had left Wilton to work in another city -- they asked for her phone number so they could contact her.

At the time the Mountain Valley case took place, Jones was among the least experienced and youngest of the reporters. Consequently, she recalls learning a series of painful lessons about working as a reporter on an emotional case in a highly competitive atmosphere. While the trauma of covering the Mountain Valley case eventually led her to temporarily leave radio news, she recently returned to work as the news director of a radio station in another major city.

The highly charged emotional nature of the case also presented special problems for Jones. Because she had never covered a child sexual abuse case, she constantly found herself unable to distance herself from each day's barrage of sensational allegations. She traces some of her special problems with emotion to the nature of the medium in which she was working. Radio, she suggested, denied her a chance to confront her feelings during the work day. The result was a nightly torrent of emotion.

Jones covered the Mountain Valley case from the earliest allegations to the final verdict against Valerie and Mary Simpson.

Television Reporter

Howard Reardon, Reporter, WDEF-TV

Howard Reardon was the only television reporter who agreed to be interviewed for this study. Several adamantly refused, while others claimed that their busy schedules precluded their participation. This raised the question of whether or not to exclude his exceptional case and design the present study

exclusively as an inquiry into the practices of newspaper reporters during a moral panic. Reardon's interview, however, was so replete with extensive and perceptive observations about all aspects of the Mountain Valley case -- especially about his print colleagues -- that his case is being included. Obviously, one interview -- however valuable and informative -- is not enough to allow for any useful generalizations about the work of television reporters.

Howard Reardon was an experienced network correspondent before coming to WDEF-TV, Wilton's CBS affiliate. Reardon worked as a general assignment reporter and occasionally was asked to anchor the morning and weekend newscasts. Unlike the other reporters interviewed, Reardon only covered the case intermittently. When assigned other high profile stories, he would lose touch with the case for extended periods of time.

Reardon is a young, thoughtful, even cerebral, reporter. Virtually alone among those interviewed, he seemed more interested in the case's subtleties and complexities than in the larger events that galvanized public attention. He was especially concerned that the whole atmosphere in Wilton during the case, in which the reporters and the community seemed sharply divided on the issue of guilt and innocence, made it very hard for a more subtle analysis to emerge.

Like his colleagues, Reardon was constantly scrutinized by parties on both sides for evidence of his sympathies. Eventually -- despite his attempts to maintain an appearance of neutrality -- he came to be perceived by the defense

as among the most sympathetic to their cause. In fact, defense supporters Bill and Susan Gordon strongly believed that, while Reardon at first believed the accusations, he eventually came to believe that Mark, Mary, and Valerie Simpson were innocent.

Reardon was surprised when told how he was perceived. For, much like Annette Marshall, who was also perceived as sympathetic to the defense, Reardon eventually came to believe that most of the accusations were true. Yet also like Marshall, it seems that his willingness to simply listen to the defense led to a misperception of his sympathies.

Reardon was interviewed at the studios of WDEF-TV.

Newspaper Editors

Charles Jackson, Editor, Wilton Times

Charles Jackson began working at the Wilton Times just as the story was breaking. Having arrived at the Wilton Times after a number of years as a reporter at another major newspaper, the Mountain Valley case was his first job as an editor.

Jackson had many of the typical responsibilities of an editor managing the coverage of a major story. As the case unfolded, he was in frequent contact with Les Osborn, Paul Paley, and several other Wilton Times reporters about how the case was being covered, which aspects of the story to stress, and how to deal with unexpected problems that arose.

One of the main problems was the dispute between Les Osborn and Paul

Paley, the two reporters covering the case for the Wilton Times. Osborn, an opinionated, seasoned reporter, believed that the Simpsons were guilty. Paley had concluded that the charges were false. Each felt that the other had rushed to judgement without adequate information. Jackson was in the middle, largely supportive of Osborn's reporting of the case but not unsympathetic to the possibility that Mark Simpson may have been innocent.

Given the reputation of the Wilton Times as a prestigious national daily, many of Jackson's colleagues did not feel that the sensational Mountain Valley case met the newspaper's usual high standards. In fact, while local and state political coverage had a long tradition at the newspaper, metropolitan crime coverage in general had not been especially valued. Some of Jackson's colleagues argued that, because it would probably be impossible to outdo the more sensational Wilton American, it was futile to even try. Consequently, within the Wilton Times bureaucracy, Jackson was frequently in the position of having to vigorously lobby for more visible placement of the Mountain Valley stories.

Eventually, as the coverage of the case in the tabloid Wilton American increased, Jackson was more successful arguing for greater coverage of crime in the Wilton Times. The feeling at the paper was that, while some stories are beneath the standards of a prestige daily and can be completely conceded to a tabloid, others are simply too important to ignore. However, while the Mountain Valley case was often on the front page of the tabloid, most of the

stories at the Wilton Times were placed in the second section devoted to city affairs.

Jackson was interviewed in his office at the Wilton Times.

Carl Mason, Editor, Wilton American

Carl Mason directed the coverage of the Mountain Valley case for the tabloid Wilton American. More than any of the reporters and editors interviewed for this study, Mason had -- in the years since the case ended -- thought extensively about what the case reveals about the nature of newswork. Indeed, he presented quite a paradoxical personality: On one hand, he was a typically competitive, even combative, tabloid journalist who proudly boasted that, during his tenure, no good story dealing with "tits, tots, or terror" was left out of the Wilton American. On the other hand, he was able to speak articulately about many of the mistakes he regrets in the Wilton American's coverage. During our interview, he seemed alternately proud and somewhat ashamed of his newspaper's coverage.

Mason relishes the fact that the Wilton American consistently out-dueled the Wilton Times, the prestigious national daily also published in downtown Wilton. He believed that the coverage of the Mountain Valley case was marked by aggressive reporting and the cultivation of good police sources. In fact, it particularly galled Mason that the competitors from the Wilton Times would criticize the Wilton American for its low standards whenever it was beaten to the punch on a breaking story.

At the same time, he is uneasy about the possibility that the Wilton American's coverage may have leaned too heavily toward the conclusion that the Simpsons were guilty. Like many of those involved with the case, these continuing doubts are a function of the absence of compelling physical evidence.

Mason was interviewed in the city room of the Wilton American.

Others Interviewed

In addition to the newswriters, in-depth interviews were conducted with the following people in Wilton and Mountain Valley. These supplementary interviews were conducted primarily to gather background information about the press coverage:

Thomas Marshfield	Defense Attorney
William Hartnett	Prosecutor, McKinley County District Attorney
Sally Simpson	Wife of defendant Mark Simpson
Martha Riley	Mother of Sally Simpson
	Mother-in-law of defendant Mark Simpson
Jim Riley	Father of Sally Simpson
	Father-in-law of defendant Mark Simpson
Bill Gordon	Friend of defendant Mark Simpson
	Husband of Susan Gordon
Susan Gordon	Friend of defendant Mark Simpson
	Wife of Bill Gordon

John McFeeley	Fiance of defendant Mary Simpson
Julie Donnelly	McKinley County Victim Support Coordinator

Other Parties Mentioned in the Mountain Valley Case Study

Additionally, the following people will be mentioned in this account.

Although they were not interviewed for this study, they were mentioned frequently by the respondents:

Pamela Barnes	Reporter	<u>Wilton American</u>
Andrew Post	Publisher	<u>Wilton American</u>
Matthew Gary	Editor	<u>Wilton Times</u>
Drew Butler	Editor	<u>Mountain Valley Courier</u>
Sidney Seawright	Publisher	<u>Mountain Valley Courier</u>
Joseph Dyson	Reporter	WGHI-TV
Rodney Michaels	Chief	Mountain Valley Police Department
Martin Solway	Judge	McKinley County Court

Secondary Data Collection:
News Coverage of the Mountain Valley Case

While conducting the in-depth interviews, one of the parties to the case offered to provide a collection of every news story on the Mountain Valley case that appeared in the Wilton Times, the Wilton American, and the Mountain Valley Courier. The source of the collection, who asked to remain anonymous, collected the clippings because of a personal connection to one of the major parties to the case. Comprised of approximately 650 stories that appeared in an approximately forty month period, the collection was a central

tool of the case study. When a respondent would refer during an interview to a story that he or she had written during an interview, it was possible to review the story, analyze it in light of the respondent's comments, and present excerpts in the text of the present study.

This tool was especially useful for two reasons: First, only a select number of major daily newspapers are indexed. Thus, while an index does exist for the Wilton Times, no such tool exists for either the Wilton American or the Mountain Valley Courier. The collection of news stories made it possible to avoid the time-consuming and error-prone process of reading every issue each of the newspapers that covered the Mountain Valley case. Even more importantly, the Mountain Valley Courier -- the small community daily in Mountain Valley -- is simply unavailable for review. In other words, because of the central role played by the Mountain Valley Courier in the following account, it would have been impossible to complete the present study without the collection of news stories.

One other source of secondary data was especially useful. Two of the reporters provided their files on the Mountain Valley case. While much of this material duplicated the collection of news stories, the reporters' files also included notes they had made as they covered the case and -- in one case -- the text of several stories that were killed by editors. These "killed" stories provided especially useful data about the reporters covered the events in Mountain Valley.

Managing, Recording, and Transcribing Data

Because of the desire to engage in lively, exploratory conversations with the respondents, a decision was made not to take detailed notes. Rather, each interview was tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. The only notes taken during the interviews were intended to underscore notable comments that could be examined more closely when the transcripts were analyzed.

The most important decision made about data management was that I would transcribe every interview. Transcription services are available, and it was tempting to use such a time-saving device. Yet, at an early stage of the study, I decided that the process of closely listening to each interview, and transcribing each word, was simply too useful a tool to relinquish to a disinterested party. For example, while transcribing the interviews, I was able to insert useful comments and observations in the transcript that enriched and simplified the subsequent analysis. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine that I could have mined the data as deeply had I not transcribed the interviews myself.

The practical implication of this decision was to substantially extend the time it took to complete the study. The close to 40 hours of taped interviews yielded almost 200 pages of interview transcripts. These transcripts, along with the copious notes taken while I transcribed them, became the raw material of the case study in the following chapters.

Data Analysis Strategies

Given the exploratory style of this case study, much of the analysis of newswork in a moral panic took place while the in-depth interviews were conducted and transcribed. Starting with the first interview with Sally McDonald of the Wilton American, each interview was reviewed as soon as it was completed for unexpected revelations that could be explored with the remaining respondents. This process of constantly altering the interviews in light of new information follows the inductive technique recommended by Schatzman and Strauss in their influential text on field research. Such research, they suggest, demands flexibility and a willingness to concede that initial hypotheses might turn out to be less fruitful than initially believed.

Our model researcher starts analyzing very early in the research process. For him, the option represents an analytic strategy: he needs to analyze as he goes along both to adjust his observation strategies, shifting some emphasis towards those experiences which bear upon the development of his understanding, and generally, to exercise control over his emerging ideas by virtually simultaneous "checking" or "testing" of those ideas. (1973:108-110)

This passage, which was discovered after the data was analyzed, is an unusually apt description of the process of completing the Mountain Valley case study. Virtually every key finding in the final account, from the role of emotions in newswork to the intense controversy about whether to use explicit language in news accounts, only emerged because of this flexible, exploratory style of data analysis.

Telling the Story of a Moral Panic:
A Final Note on the Mountain Valley Case Study

An important note: Moral panics are social constructions. They are collectively defined by both those on the periphery who witness the episode and those who directly participate. Consequently, what follows will be less an objective, factual chronology than an analysis of how the participants themselves defined and understood the situation. Included in this account of a panic will be both the words of the newswriters interviewed for this study and excerpts of news stories that they produced. The admittedly subjective accounts produced by these newswriters, rather than an investigation of their accuracy, will be the central task of this study, focusing on what these reporters wrote and said as they went about the business of constructing accounts of deviance in a moral panic.

This emphasis on the subjective definitions imposed by the panic's participants follows both social constructionist theory and the earlier work of symbolic interactionists who emphasized the interpretive and definitional processes of actors. What these newswriters wrote and said as they went about the business of deviance definition, rather than any search for the objective truth of the Mountain Valley case, will be the focus of the case study.

Cohen's (1980) framework -- described in detail in the previous review of the literature -- falls very much within this subjectivist tradition and is especially useful for telling the story of the events in Mountain Valley. In Folk

Devils and Moral Panics (1980), he describes what happens when a form of deviance emerges so suddenly – perhaps as a result of a dramatic and widely publicized deviant act – that routine news is swiftly overshadowed by a tidal wave of public revulsion against a newly discovered threat to the social order.

Using Cohen's stages of a moral panic as the organizing framework (warning, impact, inventory, and reaction), a number of questions will be addressed in the following three chapters: How did the panic get started? How did the key events unfold? How did the panic's participants define and understand the situation? How did stories spread that fueled the panic? Most importantly, given Cohen's reliance on the labeling approach to deviance, what role did the newswriters play in defining, labelling, and controlling deviance during the Mountain Valley moral panic?

Several final words of caution about the following account: Like any artificial construct, Cohen's work on moral panic tends to overstate the extent to which each stage is separate from the others. While such a construct can be a useful theoretical tool, it is important to remember that social life – especially life during an inherently chaotic moral panic – does not unfold in an linear or sequential fashion. Consequently, what follows will not use the stages as rigid categories but as valuable explanatory tools that help explain a confusing and tumultuous time.

Also, it is important to note that this case study did not involve long-term, ethnographic field work in the newsrooms where the Mountain Valley panic

was reported. It a case study relying on retrospective in-depth interviews with participants and a virtually complete collection of the printed news accounts that were the raw material of the panic. While much of the best work has examined routine newswork using participant observation (Fishman 1978, 1980; Gans 1979; Tuchman 1972, 1978), the present study's interest in an unusual event in the past precluded such direct observation. One result is that the following account focuses less on daily routines -- which were not observed -- than on a series of conflicts and controversies that vividly illustrate the nature of newswork in a moral panic.

How, then, did the newsworkers respond to the Mountain Valley panic's point of impact?

CHAPTER V

"DAY CARE STAFF IN SEX PROBE:" THE WARNING AND IMPACT STAGES

Before describing the panic's roughly two week impact stage, which began when the residents first heard about the allegations, it is important to more fully set the stage for the events in Mountain Valley. In fact, by the time officials announced the arrests at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center, extensive claims-making about threats to children had already created a fertile context for a panic about child sexual abuse. This context, what Cohen called the warning stage, sensitized the community to the deviant threat and set the stage for the traumatic impact that followed.

Setting the Stage for the Mountain Valley Panic: The Warning Stage

Society sometimes seems unprepared for news about particularly heinous acts of deviance. Because these violations lie so completely outside the boundaries of acceptable normative conduct, people often react to such news with surprise and indignation. Who could imagine, they ask, that anyone is capable of doing such things? Child sexual abuse, in particular, is seen as such a severe violation that many of those interviewed for this study -- including reporters with extensive experience covering crime -- were stunned at the nature of the initial revelations in Mountain Valley. Sally McDonald, who

covered the case for the Wilton American, described her early reaction to allegations that seemed to lie completely outside the realm of the possible:

I remember that it was the first case like this in this area... You'll have to tell when the McMartin case was, because I remember at some point that came up. I just remember that this was something we had never seen before. It was something totally new -- that sort of large scale allegation of abuse at a day-care center. This was the first for the Wilton American that I know of. I mean we had limited cases of child sexual abuse, but we had never seen anything where you had the number of allegations involving a number of students.

Given this attitude, it follows that many of the reporters were also surprised by the wave of public indignation that followed the initial allegation. People in Mountain Valley and in neighboring Wilton seemed to spontaneously unite in opposition to this newly discovered threat to the social order. Reporters scrambled to keep up with the wave of moral indignation.

Yet moral panics are not random, spontaneous phenomena. They arise in particular social and cultural contexts when, as Cohen suggests, society is especially ready to view a form of deviance as a threat to cherished values. While the deviance seemed "new" to McDonald and others, who often could not recall the other cases that were occurring at the time, moral panics are actually the culmination of extended periods in which claims-makers have successfully "warned" the public that they should be concerned about a given threat. This warning, a complex web of claims successfully promoted by diverse claims-makers, creates an atmosphere of inevitability for the actual impact of the panic. The horrible initial incidents that are finally reported in such a fertile environment of fear and anxiety -- sometimes referred to as

atrocious tales (Best 1990) – provide the inevitable and visible confirmation that the slowly encroaching fear was legitimate.

Cohen describes the warning stage as one in which apprehensions arise...

...based on conditions out of which danger may arise. The warning must be coded to be understood and impressive enough to overcome resistance to the belief that current tranquility can be upset...people are exposed to communication from others, or to sign from the approaching disaster itself indicating specific imminent danger. Indeed, sometimes the long period of preparation seems to make the panic itself almost inevitable. (1980:22)

What sort of warning was there that led up to the events in Mountain Valley?

What factors created a sense of inevitability for the panic? More specifically, why and how had the idea that children were in danger gained such legitimacy in the preceding years?

The most comprehensive and authoritative work on the growing concern about child safety in the 1980s is Joel Best's Threatened Children: Rhetoric and Concern about Child Victims (1990). Using data from a variety of sources, Best describes how a plethora of claims-makers successfully promoted the notion that children were in peril. This national wave of claims-making, along with more local developments in the vicinity of Wilton, served as the "warning" for the Mountain Valley panic. Indeed, by the time the allegations about child sexual abuse at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center were first announced, community members had been well prepared for the idea that their children might be in danger.

Drawing on Aries (1962) and other historical sources (Platt 1969; Shorter 1975), Best argues that the child sexual abuse panic was preceded by a lengthy

period in which childhood came to be defined as a unique stage of life requiring special protection. The view that developed in the 19th century, which Zelizer (1985) and Wisby (1968) suggest has remained dominant in contemporary discourse, is that children are precious commodities in constant danger of being tainted, even ruined, by contact with the evil adult world. While this view provided the foundation for many progressive developments in child welfare, including changes in child labor laws and the eventual elimination of alms-houses and orphan asylums, it also institutionalized the notion that children are in constant danger of violation by exploitative adults. In other words, the same deeply ingrained child protection impulse that fueled important social reform also prepared the way for periodic waves of indignation about threats to child safety from predatory adults.

Before the wave of concern about child sexual abuse in the 1980s, the most notable previous period of intense concern about threats to children occurred in the 1940s, when a series of widely publicized child homicides and sex crimes led a number of states to pass so-called sexual psychopath laws. These laws, described by Sutherland (1950), allowed states to permanently detain anyone diagnosed by a psychiatrist as a sexual psychopath. Yet the most recent period of widespread concern about threats to children did not begin until 1962, when -- as Pfohl (1977) has written -- child abuse was "discovered."

This "discovery" began in 1962, when the pediatrician C. Henry Kempe

and his colleagues published a paper in the Journal of the American Medical Association entitled "The Battered Child Syndrome" (1962). Following earlier work by pediatric radiologists, Kempe suggested that many unexplained bone fractures and subdural hematomas in children had actually been caused by purposive physical abuse. Almost immediately, this "new" problem was seized by the popular media and publicized in the Saturday Evening Post and Time. In her study of the child abuse and agenda setting, political scientist Barbara Nelson describes how Kempe's article, and the widespread publicity that followed, led virtually all state legislatures to quickly pass mandatory child abuse reporting laws (1984). Nelson characterizes child abuse as a "valence issue" that "elicits a single, strong, fairly uniform emotional response and does not have an adversarial quality," and traces the speedy public response to this unanimous wave of public indignation (1984:27).

Politicians and activists of virtually every political stripe actively joined the chorus and, by 1974, President Richard Nixon had signed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). Sponsored by Senator Walter Mondale (D-Minnesota) with bi-partisan support, CAPTA represented the first federal attempt to address the physical abuse of children (Hoffman 1978). Aside from arguments by some conservative senators that corporal punishment should not be considered child abuse, there was no significant opposition to the bill. Indeed, this early example of legislative unanimity foreshadowed the nature of much of the subsequent discourse about child abuse, including the

press coverage of the Mountain Valley case, in which the flood of moral indignation made any opposition seem heretical.

While child sexual abuse was virtually invisible in the CAPTA debate, claims-makers almost immediately began what Joel Best calls "domain expansion," arguing that the definition of child abuse should be expanded to include sexual abuse. Gradually, the terms "incest" and "child molestation" became subsumed in the more inclusive term "child sexual abuse," capitalizing on existing concern about child abuse (Weisberg 1984). Claims-makers, aided by significant attention from the mass media, further expanded the domain of child abuse to include incest (Hawkins 1984), child pornography (Stanley 1989), adolescent prostitution (Weisberg 1985), pedophilia (Gelman 1984), and child sex rings (Nathan 1987). The result was that child abuse, a term for which there were no entries in the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature before 1968, was rated in 1981 as a serious social problem by 62% of the American public (Brown, Flanagan, and McLeod 1984).

This growing interest in child sexual abuse was seized by both conservative and liberal claims-makers: Those on the right, particularly christian fundamentalists, saw the burgeoning threats to children as supporting their view that the nuclear family was in decline and that parental authority was eroding. Indeed, these fundamentalists cited the cases of child sexual abuse in day-care that were beginning to come to light in 1983 as cautionary tales of the dangers of child care outside the home (Pride 1986). In this view,

working mothers were seen as the "folk-devils" responsible for placing their children in the care of strangers (Gerson 1985).

Feminists also joined the crusade, arguing that the abuse of children had to be understood in the context of all forms of family violence, including wife battering (Tierney 1982), rape (Rose 1977), and incest (Russell 1983). While their proposed remedies differed from the fundamentalists -- they saw, for example, expanded day-care as part of the solution rather than the problem -- the powerful combination of ideologically diverse claims-makers insured that the issue would remain highly visible. As Joel Best observes:

Because the vulnerability of children was generally accepted, the child-victim offered a powerful symbol for almost any claimant addressing almost any audience. No one defended harming children. To be sure, the apparent consensus could be pushed too far; disagreement was especially likely to arise over policy recommendations. For instance, fundamentalist favored discouraging day-care and abortions, while feminists supported both. But overall, campaigns against threats to children faced little overt opposition. The general sympathy for child-victims let claims-makers proceed on the basis of consensus, not conflict. (1990:183)

By the early 1980s, this flurry of claims-making activity literally exploded into a wave of concern about every conceivable threat to the health and safety of children, including missing and abducted children (Best 1987), satanism (Pazder and Smith 1980), ritual abuse (Finkelhor, Williams, and Burns 1988), and halloween violence (Best and Horiuchi 1985). At the same time, the first cases of child sexual abuse in day-care -- emerging from this volatile mix of anxiety about child safety, satanic ritual abuse, and sexual exploitation -- began to appear (Nathan 1991). The first of those cases involved allegations of

abuse at the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, California. Others took place in Miami, New York City, and Jordan, Minnesota. The first allegations of abuse at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center occurred within the year after the McMartin case came to light.

"She was a Gerber baby, strawberry blonde with all the curls:"
A Child Homicide Prepares the Community for a Moral Panic

Beyond this wider social context, in which claims about children in peril were widespread, what local events occurred just prior to the Mountain Valley case that prepared residents for a moral panic about child sexual abuse? How, in other words, did the residents of McKinley County get the idea that their children might be in danger? All that was needed to ignite the panic in Mountain Valley was a local eruption of deviance that would place the atmosphere of fear directly in the midst of the community.

The first eruption came in the form of a widely publicized homicide of a young girl. Occurring in the year just prior to the first allegations about the Mountain Valley Day Care Center, this homicide was particularly newsworthy and attracted the attention of each of the respondents. Steve Baylor of the Wilton American vividly recalled the case:

Around 1984, we had the Juliette Puffin case. She had been beaten and tossed down the stairs like a broken doll. She was a Gerber baby, strawberry blonde with all the curls. All we had were sweet pictures and the autopsy pictures.

Annette Marshall of WMNO-Radio also recalls that the Puffin case "put us all on guard." She remembers that, after yet another homicide, this time of a

child under the protection of the State Social Services Department (SSD), the state social welfare bureaucracy came under fire for alleged incompetence. A series of stories led SSD to demonstrate their vigilance by removing several children from foster homes.

It seemed that there was a great deal of focus. SSD was under fire for their inability to handle their case load and for cases that slipped between the cracks. I remember allegations being made and subsequent revelations that children were never removed from the home.

There was another case, the Juliette Puffin case, that put us all on guard. I didn't cover that one, though, because I was covering the Riverside trial which was a case involving police brutality on a massive scale in a local pub. Those were going on one floor apart in the same court house.

Finally, the respondents each noticed the events that were beginning to unfold in the McMartin case. Coming in the months just before the events in Mountain Valley, the McMartin news made a strong impression on the newswriters and sensitized them to the child sexual abuse issue. The observations of Carl Mason, editor at the Wilton American, are especially relevant. At first Mason wondered whether the reports about the McMartin and Jordan cases might actually be urban legends, but finally came to believe that the danger was real.

When I saw the McMartin news, and heard about secret rooms, and I saw them excavating the McMartin grounds for bones of sacrificed animals, they didn't find a thing. I began to think about that. And I had read Brunvand's Choking Doberman, a collection of urban folk-tales. I wondered if the things that stay the same from case to case -- in some cases satanism -- could mean something. Is it because humans are the same everywhere or because this is the way that people with that inclination do these things, or is it because of what Jung might have called the collective unconscious, that these things speak very powerfully to us.

... One of the urban folktales that we fight again and again is the clown riding around in the van. We hear it once every couple of years. I remember the first time we heard it. We scrambled. Holy shit. We didn't know it was an urban folktale. We're calling around to police departments. A headline is ready for page one. And the cops tell us that this is one of those things that crops up from time to time. Just like the exploding poodle.

On the eve of the events in Mountain Valley, each of the newswriters remember a vague feeling that children were in danger.

The Zeitgeist of Fear Comes to Life in Mountain Valley:
Introducing the Panic's Impact Stage

Even an extensive warning stage does not fully prepare society for the initial impact of a panic. Indeed, the slowly enveloping atmosphere of fear is sometimes so pervasive that it becomes hard to notice, and becomes taken for granted. Fear about some impending danger becomes less a matter of conscious reflection than part of the implicit set of assumptions -- what Schutz called the "stock knowledge" -- that people share about the world (1967). Only when the episode's precipitating incident finally takes place, and strikes at the very heart of a community's most cherished values, does the panic come to life. Distant events seen only through the media frame suddenly become concrete and immediate. Abstract fears and anxieties about the world, which had previously been simmering below the surface, are brought to life in a graphic incident. And any sense that the community had somehow been immunized from the threat is abruptly and painfully breached. This is the impact stage. Again drawing on the natural disaster analogy, "the disaster strikes and the immediate unorganized response to the death, injury or

destruction takes place" (Cohen 1980:23).

The point of impact of a panic is often a dramatic public gathering at which the community, stunned by the revelations, gathers together to collectively express doubt and to try to understand the extent of the threat. It is here that the panic -- formerly only a brewing mix of fears and anxieties -- becomes a form of collective behavior, with the very act of coming together providing a forum in which latent anxieties can be made manifest and expectations created among those present that more deviance might occur. The participants at these gatherings see others with similar fears, have their own fears confirmed, and -- with the mass media already beginning to watch closely -- move from stunned disbelief to acceptance. According to Cohen, those rushing to the focal point of the panic, including newswriters, victims, and control agents, try to

...restructure an ambiguous situation by seeking cues in the reactions of others. It is this type of restructuring that marks the next crucial stage: without it, a concentrated and excited crowd would have soon disintegrated. A socially sanctioned meaning was given to the situation by seeing others act and through the development of rumors, individuals become more sensitized to each other and a common emotional tone develops. (1980:154)

At virtually the same time, the newswriters, having also been prepared during the warning stage to be ready for an outbreak of deviance, begin to construct accounts for the larger audience and further shape the public's fear. These news accounts begin to define the nature and extent of the deviant acts, call attention to other examples of the deviance, and create a picture of the folk-devils who will serve as the visible, concrete manifestations of the

deviance. This is also when the process of amplification begins, in which the form and content of news accounts begin to create the escalating expectation that the world is a dangerous place where more outbreaks of the deviance are virtually inevitable.

Agents of social control are also alerted to the outbreak at this point and quickly respond to the accelerating wave of public indignation. They might even convene the initial gathering as a way of alerting the community to the threat. All of these agents -- police, state welfare officials, and prosecutors -- function as moral entrepreneurs at this early stage, vigorously promoting the problem as one that requires public attention and providing the public with information that they have gathered about the act of deviance. They provide much of this privileged information directly to newswriters who, faced with a public already clamoring for news, happily serve as conduits for official versions of events.

This reliance on official sources, and the preferred reading given their versions of events, is confirmed by the Mountain Valley case (Fishman 1980, 1981; Gans 1979; Roshco 1975; Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1972, 1978). Indeed, much of the panic's impact stage was marked by an almost desperate scramble by newswriters to nurture official sources in the Mountain Valley Police Department who could confirm that children had been sexually abused. Such a source did emerge, but -- to the chagrin of those covering the case -- chose to speak primarily with one reporter who he felt could most effectively publicize

official efforts to root out the deviance.

However, the Mountain Valley case also reveals that newswriters without access to a key source were able to improvise alternate newsgathering strategies that went a long way in meeting the demands made by their editors for more news. Precluded from dealing with the source closest to the investigation, reporters chose instead to develop relationships with the parents of the alleged victims, social welfare officials, and the friends and supporters of the defendants. While the newswriters got a clear message from their editors that these sources were less valued than a direct line to the police department, these alternate sources proved to be rich sources of information for the next several years. Indeed, the origins of the Mountain Valley panic are very much embedded in that initial competitive skirmish, as the published revelations gathered from each source created the impression of a growing, unavoidable menace.

What was the point of impact for the Mountain Valley panic?

"Angered Parents Meet With Police" (Wilton American):
The Impact Stage

After receiving a report from one of the parents at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center that her child had been raped by Center co-owner Mark Simpson, Mountain Valley Police Chief Rodney Michaels questioned and arrested Simpson. The State Social Services Department (SSD), when informed of Mr. Simpson's arrest, ordered the Mountain Valley Day Care Center closed. Parents with children at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center

hurried to a meeting at the police station called by Chief Michaels, and heard presentations by the Chief and by SSD representatives about how to learn from their children if more instances of abuse had occurred. This meeting, at which a number of parents crowded into the Mountain Valley Police Department to hear about the allegations, was the point of impact for the panic.

While the meeting was closed to the press, reporters from the Wilton Times, the Wilton American, and the Mountain Valley Courier, as well as reporters from a number of television and radio stations, had been assigned by their editors to go to the police station. At the same time, each of the reporters also began to cultivate sources who could provide additional details about the case. A plethora of provocative rumors were in the air, including the widely circulated suggestion that the Simpsons may have taken pornographic photographs of the children, and the reporters jumped into the fray. Even moments after hearing about the events at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center, each reporter was unusually excited about the prospect of covering a case that would attract such intense public scrutiny. When they arrived at the police station, they found it surrounded by other reporters, people from the community, and parents of children attending the Mountain Valley Day Care Center, all clamoring for details about the allegations.

The Newswriters Respond:

Anonymous Police Sources and the Origins of a Panic

One of the first news accounts of the meeting was written by Sally McDonald, one of several lead crime reporters for the tabloid Wilton

American. Her story, with headline "Angered parents meet with police," creates a vivid picture of traumatized parents who are unable to accept that the allegations are true. At the same time, the parents can already be seen struggling to accept at least the possibility that something may have happened. One father — whose comment is a further confirmation of how a community becomes sensitive to an issue during the warning stage — describes how other previous sexual abuse cases had already led him to question his child.

This makes me sick to think this happened where my son goes to school. Ever since I started reading about all this sexual abuse of children in day-care centers, I always ask my son about it. He's a real smart kid and he'd tell me if anything like that happened. If this had happened to my son, they'd have to put me in a cell right now. (Wilton American)

A mother emerging from the meeting makes the first mention of a theme that will advance the panic in much of the subsequent coverage: However incredulous the allegations, children are simply incapable of lying about such detailed and explicit acts. While this mother has not completely discarded her disbelief, she nonetheless reluctantly concludes that if children had said they had been abused, they probably had.

I don't know what to do. I have two children that go there. It's a shocking thing to us. I don't know whether the man is guilty or innocent, but they are our children, so we have to assume something happened. (Wilton American)

These accounts early in the panic depict the struggle of the parents to accept that something had happened. The Mountain Valley Day Care Center may, as one mother said, been "one of the best day-care centers I have ever seen" (Wilton American), but it was also quickly being redefined in news

accounts as a place where horrible acts had probably been committed against children. Indeed, much of the impact stage is a process by which all the parties — parents, police, attorneys, newswriters — make this transition from stunned disbelief to reluctant acceptance.

Carl Mason, city editor of the tabloid Wilton American, remembers when he first heard about the case. Echoing Cohen's use of the natural disaster metaphor, he likened the initial impact to being hit by a wave. As each new detail about the case was relayed to the newsroom, Mason felt as if Wilton was confronting a physical calamity:

It was like being at the beach for a day and getting hit by a dozen tidal waves. Some days, you think everything is set, and at 6:00PM, something you didn't see coming rolls in. You dust yourself off and another one hits. Before you know it, your budget is entirely changed from what you had predicted. You have to change the way you had assigned the resources. You've got to fight the biggest fire.

One of the reporters he dispatched to the Mountain Valley police station, Saliy McDonald, recalls the competitive frenzy that began. Known among her colleagues as having some of the best police sources in Wilton, McDonald's first strategy was to penetrate the wall of silence that she feared would be set up around the Mountain Valley Police Department. However, because someone in the Mountain Valley Police Department decided it was important that the Department be seen as aggressively investigating the case, McDonald was almost immediately able to cultivate a key police source. For the next several months, that source provided her with information, often before any of the other reporters, and allowed her to produce a string of stories that depicted

a steadily mushrooming investigation. She loved the thrill of the chase -- especially taking on the more prestigious Wilton Times -- and was proud of having developed a source that allowed her to set the agenda for much of the case's early coverage:

I remember that it was a very competitive situation with the Wilton Times. We compete head to head with them and were trying to dig out what was happening. At the station, they weren't officially releasing anything. It was a real scramble to find out what allegations there were. We knew there were some allegations, but nobody officially was saying much. Of course, when you don't tell a reporter something, it peaks the interest all the more. I do remember that we managed to cultivate a source who was in a position to know what was going on. We would call this person and leave a fictitious name so he would know we were calling and so other people wouldn't.

Not surprisingly, none of the respondents were willing to reveal the name of McDonald's source. Everyone, though, seemed fairly certain that he was an official who wanted the allegations publicized and knew that a tabloid reporter like McDonald would give the stories prominent play. In the week after the parent's meeting, a different story by McDonald appeared each day in the Wilton American with more exclusive details about the nature of the abuse at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center. These stories encouraged other media outlets to join the scramble, and created the impression that the problem was escalating.

For example, two days after the parent's meeting -- in a story titled "Preschool sex probe widens" -- McDonald used information from her anonymous source to write a story about several additional children whose abuse she claimed had been confirmed. Speaking in terms that imply a

widening and enlarging panic, the anonymous source used the precise language of contagion that Cohen suggested was typical of the impact stage:

"Two cases of sexual abuse have been confirmed, but they are only the tip of the iceberg," said one source who asked not to be named... This thing is unraveling minute by minute," one source said. "No one's sure how far it will lead. (Wilton American)

Cohen stresses that a panic moves forward because much of the coverage implies that what happened will happen again. Indeed, when the source claims that "no one is sure how far it will lead," the strong implication is that it will lead somewhere. When he describes the initial allegations as only being "the tip of the iceberg," he is clearly suggesting that additional revelations lie below the surface. Here language serves as the raw material of panic construction, implying that the morality play about to unfold has a certain tragic inevitability and that the participants are virtually powerless to stop the inexorable course of events. At the same time, the alternate view -- that the tip might be all there is of the iceberg -- is already being edged out of the media frame. The following account of the events in Mountain Valley will return periodically to the role of language in the newsworker's construction of the panic, and will provide evidence of the key role that constructionists have begun to assign language in the definition of social problems (Maynard 1988).

In the same week as the "iceberg" story, while her competitors from the Wilton Times and the Mountain Valley Courier were still trying to cover the case without such a source, McDonald dropped yet another bombshell. In an "above-the-fold" front page story with the headline "Kid Sex Victims May

Total 20," she revealed that the case that had begun with one allegation of rape had now ballooned to more than 20 alleged victims. In this story, she also first revealed that Mark Simpson's mother Mary and his sister Valerie were under investigation.

In yet another example of the language of contagion, the story includes a caption under a photograph of the Mountain Valley Day Care Center that reads:

Simpson was arrested on a charge of raping a 5 year-old boy at the school. Officials are probing the possibility that dozens more youths may have been attacked. (Wilton American)

In other words, having revealed that 20 children may have been abused, the story has now shifted to the use of "dozens," implying that there may have been more than 20. Again, subtle changes in the use of language help move the panic forward. The imprecision about the number of children, indeed the imprecision about virtually all aspects of the case, is typical of the state of disorganization that marks the impact stage. This confused and contested terrain provides a fertile atmosphere for the panic's growth, and allows media consumers to "fill-in" any aspects of the panics that remain ambiguous.

One of McDonald's colleagues and close friends was Steve Baylor, another reporter for the Wilton American. Along with McDonald, Baylor was one of several crime reporters for the Wilton American. While he would later be assigned to cover the second Mountain Valley trial, in which Mark Simpson's mother Mary and his sister Valerie would be tried on multiple sex abuse

charges, on the first day that the Mountain Valley Day Care Center was closed he was already covering another high profile case. He remembers watching admiringly as McDonald's exclusives dominated the early coverage. When he discussed the case with McDonald at the time, he recalls warning her that the management at the Wilton American had mistreated sources in the past. Baylor remembered times when, after his anonymous sources had no longer possessed valuable information, they had often been ungratefully cast aside.

Shit usually rolls downhill and waiting at the bottom is the reporter. But Sally McDonald had great sources among the parents and the police in Mountain Valley. Management at the Wilton American are ingrates. They burn sources and they burn people. They're like hookers. They love the sources for as long as they need them and the next day they don't know them. They stroke, and the next day they...

The court system is worse than politics. You write a story that says Sgt. Smith has done a shitty investigation and he'll remember it. The next day your boss says to go out and find Sgt. Smith and ask him such and such. He'll still remember the two days before when you insulted him in front of his peers. We figure it will be printed and forgotten. That may be the case, but Sgt. Smith sees his name in the paper once a year and doesn't forget. That used to happen all the time on the beat. A lot of it was personal.

Baylor understood the importance of good sources at the early stage of covering a high-profile case, and eventually -- when he was assigned to the case -- used them himself. Indeed, he seemed to intuitively understand the intricate ballet that characterizes reporter/source relations, and painted a cynical picture in which a reporter selectively doles out information or access to a source to increase the chance that the source might be forthcoming in the future.

Sally built up that trust and could talk off the record and people knew they wouldn't get burned. She had sources at the highest levels who were feeding them information. If Sally had sinned, those sources would have dried up.

When the DA is benefitting from the press and finding out things that he wouldn't have necessarily learned by sending an investigator out, then you have something to trade back. I have done it myself. When something good was coming down the pike, I was not adverse to picking up a phone and calling a prosecutor or calling a defense lawyer and warning of something coming at them. I threw something back into the pot. Everybody ran a tally sheet in their own mind.

Sally became reliable. You could pick up the paper and know that you were getting straight poop. You knew she was ahead of the game.

McDonald's source was able to successfully define the agenda of the early coverage of the events in Mountain Valley. Even the television and radio stations were forced to broadcast only slightly re-packaged versions of her revelations. How, though, did her primary print competitors at the Mountain Valley Courier and the Wilton Times respond? And how did their response even further press the panic forward?

McDonald's Anonymous Source:
The Mountain Valley Courier Responds

Baylor's observation that McDonald was ahead of the game was shared by reporters at each of the other newspapers. It seemed that each day a new revelation would appear on the cover of the Wilton American under her by-line. Her editor Carl Mason was ecstatic because, as the step-child of a more prestigious daily, the Wilton American constantly felt that it had to be out ahead of the Wilton Times. He resented that, even though the editors at the Wilton Times might publicly take the high road and claim to be above such

rough and tumble sensationalism, they always seemed to go after the same stories with the same level of energy.

In the beginning, we kicked the Wilton Times's ass on this story. My recollection is that we started to scramble. The editors at the Wilton Times always seem to scream the loudest about ethics when they're being beaten the worst. They try to have it both ways. They want to be the paragon of journalistic ethics and they don't want to be beaten. So, they'll say to us: Boy, that's really shitty reporting. And then they try to get it in the story tomorrow.

Sally McDonald's lock on a key source did not go unnoticed by the other media outlets in Wilton and in Mountain Valley, but there was little they could do stop her flood of revelations. Confronted with her competitive advantage, each of the other newspapers struggled to find some unique peg on which they could hang stories about the events at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center. Without a pipeline to the investigators, they improvised strategies that focused on aspects of the case other than the investigation. Indeed, each organizational response to the McDonald exclusive set patterns for the episode's subsequent coverage and played a role in pressing the panic forward.

For example, James Redman, the reporter for the local Mountain Valley Courier, found that he was almost completely outflanked by his big-city colleagues. Redman had grown up in Mountain Valley and had just begun his career as a reporter. Yet the sources at the Mountain Valley Police Department refused to provide him with any competitive advantage. Chief Rodney Michaels knew that the case would attract national interest, and he preferred to deal with larger outlets from Wilton that could offer him greater visibility.

Redman describes what happened when, on the day after yet another detailed and graphic story by Sally McDonald had appeared in the Wilton American, he went to the police station and angrily confronted Chief Michaels. The Chief denied that anyone in the Mountain Valley Police Department was McDonald's source, but Redman knew better. He even suggested to the Chief that they engage in a deception of sorts:

I knew they had a pipeline. The Chief told me: "I don't know where the Wilton American is getting this shit." I said: "Come on chief. At least give me the same stuff so I can play the charade and you can play the charade. And I can write that you reacted angrily at the suggestion that there is a leak."

Being excluded was especially galling to Redman, who knew the investigating officers and had given them extensive publicity in previous cases. He bitterly remembered that, when the police had needed him, they had never failed to wake him in the middle of the night to announce a solved homicide or a captured fugitive. He had previously served as a valuable conduit for information that had promoted the image of the Mountain Valley Police Department in the Mountain Valley Courier. Now, though, he was cast aside in favor of other reporters who could better serve the source's publicity needs. The previous relationship, which had been so mutually beneficial, now seemed not to matter at all. It was small consolation that he understood why Sally McDonald of the Wilton American would have an inherent advantage in getting a source to talk.

We started chasing the Wilton American because Sally McDonald had that direct line to a source. The source used her because they had greater

circulation and the Wilton Times wouldn't touch the stuff. That was when the Wilton American was a little more reckless. That's when they would write "Kid Sex Clown Bites Penis." But Sally got it all, and as a cub, I wondered why I didn't have these great sources. Then I slowly realized that it wasn't me. They just wanted the paper that would give them the greatest bang for the buck. Get the word out. Get then to plead. Get more kids. Get more parents to think: "Gee, maybe I should bring my kids in."

Obviously, Michaels -- or whoever the source was in the Mountain Valley Police Department -- was choosing to promote this unplanned event through the channel he felt would most effectively depict him as effectively combatting the deviance. This follows Molotch and Lester's influential essay, in which news is described as "the political work by which events are constituted by those who currently happen to hold power" (1974:111). In choosing to selectively leak information to only one reporter, the source was seeking a preferred reading for his version of reality and engaging in what Molotch and Lester called the "practices of those who have the power to determine the experiences of others" (1974:54).

But during the course of the study, another reason was revealed that the police source was reluctant to give information to Redman. While the other reporters were not yet aware of the fact, the publisher of the Mountain Valley Courier, Sidney Seawright, whose family owned a chain of community newspapers in and around Mountain Valley, was a friend of Mary Simpson, owner of Mountain Valley Day Care Center. Chief Michaels was concerned that any information provided Redman would get back to the Simpsons. Fearing that this would compromise the investigation, Michaels resolved not to

give any information to the Mountain Valley Courier before it became publicly available. This created further problems for Redman.

When this link to the defendants was revealed, the rumor began to spread among the reporters that Redman and his newspaper were little more than shills for the defense. Soon even the McKinley County prosecutor who had become involved with the case, William Hartnett, had pegged Redman as favoring the defense. Within days, most of the other reporters had begun to view Redman as an inexperienced reporter who was being manipulated by Thomas Marshfield, a defense attorney with extensive experience fighting the battle of public opinion.

Redman bristles at suggestions he favored the defense. Indeed, he points out that, like all of Sally McDonald's competitors, he was forced to recycle details from Wilton American stories. Among reporters, such use of a competitor's story is often seen as a tacit admission of failure to develop independent information. But McDonald's exclusive story about 20 potential victims received such extensive play that Redman simply could not ignore it. The story he wrote did not credit the Wilton American directly, but wrote about "claims in a Wilton newspaper that as many as 20 students at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center were victims of sexual abuse."

This repetition of a story, which Wilton American editor Carl Mason called the "pile-on factor," was yet another journalistic convention that helped construct an atmosphere of contagion. Indeed, this issue will be addressed at

greater length in the next chapter on the inventory stage of the panic, when such "piling-on" will become one of the defining characteristics of newswork in the Mountain Valley panic.

But what explains the widespread perception of Redman's bias? The explanation seems to be embedded in the newsgathering routines he developed as a response to his exclusion. With no good police sources, Redman's alternative was to nurture relations with defense attorney Thomas Marshfield in much the same way that McDonald had nurtured the prosecution. The other reporters, whose work routines were still being defined by the chase to penetrate the wall around the police department, made no such attempt and Redman was able to establish a valuable connection with the defense. The result was that his stories did provide substantially more space for statements of denial from the Simpsons and their attorney Thomas Marshfield.

Redman offered an explanation for his choice to pay attention to the defense and for the perception of his colleagues that he was biased:

First, I worked for a small local paper in the community where the biggest story in a decade was breaking. I had a big news hole to fill. The Wilton papers, with a smaller news hole, would give cursory attention to the defense. I had a larger news hole and -- while I probably needed a good editor -- I don't think I favored one side or another.

One anecdote: I hit it off pretty well with Marshfield. I don't know if I ever told you this, but I once met Simpson before he was arrested. After he got arrested, I said: "Son of a bitch, I know this guy." At his first couple of court appearances, he'd walk over and talk with me. I remember Simpson telling me that I was doing a fair job. He told his lawyer Marshfield that I was okay. That made me uncomfortable, but what was I going to do?

What Redman did was use this connection to produce stories that revealed as much about the defense strategy as McDonald's stories revealed about the prosecution. He knew he was opening himself to charges of being used, but didn't feel he was being any more exploited than McDonald. In fact, when the trial finally began, this relationship with the defense allowed Redman to produce exclusive reports on aspects of the case that other reporters had ignored. In the beginning, though, his strategy left him open to substantial scorn from his colleagues.

Typical of that disdain were the remarks of Les Osborn, a reporter for the Wilton Times who began work on the case several weeks after the point of impact. He felt that Redman's stories were suspect because of the Mountain Valley Courier publisher's friendship with defendant Mary Simpson. Osborn claimed that Redman's stories were written from his publisher's point of view.

It turns out that Sidney Seawright, publisher of the Mountain Valley Courier, was a good friend of Mary Simpson. His reporter, James Redman, wrote the stories from Seawright's point of view. Redman ended up being frozen out by the rest of the press corps. He always stood apart, all by himself. He showed me some of his clips. I asked how could he write these. Was he in the same courtroom?

McDonald shared this belief. She even goes farther and suggests a possibly conscious decision at the Mountain Valley Courier to defend the Simpsons.

I heard that the parents were very upset with the Mountain Valley Courier coverage. They thought the Mountain Valley paper decided that they were going to defend the Simpsons. And I have to say that I know the defense lawyers were trying to put a spin on the coverage. I think that the Mountain Valley Courier bought that. Because I think that if my coverage was on the money, that's why the jury verdict was the way it was. I think that my coverage reflected exactly what the jury saw.

The reaction of virtually all his colleagues reveals much about the position of the defense in a moral panic. Simply listening to the side representing the deviant threat opened Redman to charges of bias. On the other hand, McDonald's exclusive relationship with a police source was hailed as a professional coup. These attitudes, expressed so openly by the respondents in this study, will become especially relevant during the reaction phase of the panic, when the trial becomes the contested terrain on which the attorneys fight the battle of public opinion. For now it is sufficient to state that, in times of moral panic, those charged with rooting out the threat are endowed with substantial legitimacy and advantage. The presumption is that, in standing resolutely at the moral barricades, they are protecting the cherished values that are under attack. Those like Redman willing to listen to those outside the barricade become almost immediately suspect.

The Wilton Times Enters the Fray

What was happening at the prestigious Wilton Times while stories appeared each day in the Wilton American about the growing allegations? Very much in line with how the newspaper saw itself, the Wilton Times initially declined to enter the fray outside the Mountain Valley Day Care Center. These scrambles, about which the tabloid reporters and editors from the Wilton American spoke with such relish, were seen as outside the pale of acceptable journalistic practice. The cynical response from Wilton American editor Carl Mason was that the Wilton Times only took the ethical high road

when they were being soundly beaten by the competition.

However, the response of the Wilton Times to this criticism points to the role played by that newspaper's organizational history and culture in determining how they would cover the case. Charles Jackson, city editor at the Wilton Times, explained how the emphasis on political coverage had always overshadowed other kinds of state and local news.

That has always been one of the downfalls of our coverage. This paper has always prided itself on its political coverage and everything else has taken a back seat. They cover politics the way they cover football in some cities. Everything else, if we can get it in, fine. One of my first challenges was to fight for a rightful amount of space for our court coverage and those stories at the time were the ones where they were most likely to leave things out. I spent a lot of time fighting for a decent amount of space to adequately tell the Mountain Valley story with richness and detail.

Also, the Wilton Times had a tradition that criminal justice stories are best covered at the trial stage, when skilled court reporters can work in the relatively controlled atmosphere of an official proceeding. While this would change dramatically five years later, when a gruesome homicide in Wilton received such extensive national publicity that the Wilton Times felt compelled to compete with the Wilton American, they largely ceded the pre-trial coverage of the Mountain Valley case to the tabloid. Consequently, the two reporters for the Wilton Times interviewed for this study, Les Osborn and Paul Paley, are less visible at this early stage of the Mountain Valley panic than they will be when the trial begins.

At this point, the stories in the Wilton Times were almost exclusively focused on the public actions of official agencies. A typical story appeared on

the same day McDonald revealed that as many as 20 children may have been abused. With the headline "Judge rules license suspension to continue at day care center," the story in the Wilton Times focuses exclusively on the official proceedings to close the Mountain Valley Day Care Center by state officials. Yet buried in the seventh paragraph of the story is yet another reference to McDonald's story in the Wilton American alleging as many as 20 victims. Again, a competitor was forced to acknowledge McDonald's exclusive source:

A report published yesterday in the Wilton American quoted an unnamed source as saying the total number of children sexually abused at the school by staff members and another person not employed there may be as high as 20.

In other words, even the prestigious daily made its contribution to the panic's contagion. By again repeating McDonald's allegation, the unsubstantiated number 20 was even further cloaked in the mantle of truth. Further, the number was printed in a nationally respected newspaper, conferring even further legitimacy on a story that by then had appeared in three newspapers and on television and radio.

Connecting the Unconnected: The Side-Bar Story as a Tool of Panic Construction

Before this account turns to the panic's inventory stage, in which the media's role as a definer of deviance is most conspicuous, it is important to note the early appearance in the Mountain Valley coverage of the "side-bar" story, a journalistic convention that also played an important role in creating a sense of the panic's contagion. Side-bar stories typically take the form of a

small feature adjoining the main news story, usually within a box, which is in some way connected to the main story. These brief stories generally follow the less rigorous conventions of feature stories, and frequently include expert commentary about the news item or evidence of similar news stories occurring elsewhere. Most importantly, they often strongly imply connections between events and create the impression that the behavior described in the main story is not an isolated incident. The result is that events that may or may not be related are connected and seen as instances of a larger problem or theme.

Fishman described this when he wrote:

Themes give news shows and newspapers a presentational order. Individual occurrences can be grouped together as instances of a theme, and these thematic groups can be placed near each other when they are seen to share common elements. (1980:6)

The periodic use of the side-bar story was an important part of the panic's connective tissue, linking the events at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center with similar cases occurring elsewhere. Sometimes the side-bar story urged specific remedies for child sexual abuse. Other stories offered an implicit comment on the day's main story, occasionally offering a contradictory message. Finally, some side-bar stories strongly implied that, regardless of whether the evidence was persuasive in the present case, the larger problem of child sexual abuse was epidemic. The result was that the Mountain Valley case gradually came to be depicted less as a discrete incident than as an instance of a larger problem. Cohen noted that, in times of moral panic, people begin "to talk less about the event itself and more about the implications of it"

(1972:49).

Sally McDonald was among the most aggressive in creating side-bar stories that were placed near her main stories. She spoke candidly about how the Mountain Valley case led to many such stories about the larger problem of child sexual abuse.

And so, the Mountain Valley case triggered all sort of stories for us, in terms of, starting to really look at the problem of child sexual abuse. You know, finding out how. And, as a result, we did talk about how common it is. How common it is in terms of reporting. I mean, is the reporting up or down.

Note that McDonald quickly shifts from the question of how "common" child sexual abuse is to how "common" the reporting is. More than a simple semantic difference, this linguistic imprecision reveals that she seems to again be according "taken-for-granted" status to the officially reported statistics (Schutz 1967). Whether or not the incidence of child sexual abuse was or was not increasing is beyond the scope of this study. What is important is that McDonald and the other reporters believed, and reported in side-bar stories, that it was.

The first such story appeared in the Wilton American just three days after the meeting with parents at the Mountain Valley Police Department. Embedded in the story entitled "Preschool sex probe widens," the side-bar story describes several of the other major child sexual abuse cases that were being revealed at the same time, including those involving the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, California and the Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs

(PRACA) Day Care Center in New York City . The exaggeration and inaccuracy in these stories is notable. In fact, the story does little more than repeat unfounded rumors, most of which were eventually discredited. Even qualifying phrases in the story like "may have been sexually attacked" are virtually buried in the avalanche of supposed facts. These excerpts, referring to the McMartin case, are illustrative:

Investigators believe that hundreds of children over the past decade had been victims of torture and sexual attacks in the Virginia McMartin Preschool.

The abuse of youngsters, some only two years old, was filmed often and sold as child pornography.

Authorities say that there are more than 25 uncharged suspects in the case that one judge called a vast conspiracy.

One California parent said, "They are monstrous people. They are monsters and we don't know the extent of it yet."

The first three excerpts were rumors that were widely circulated during the McMartin case's lengthy pre-trial hearing. However, not one of these claims was ever introduced or substantiated. For example, the allegation about child pornography, while widely rumored, was never substantiated by any testimony or physical evidence. Neither was any evidence of a conspiracy involving 25 uncharged suspects ever introduced. In fact, only two of the seven original defendants were ever brought to trial, and both were acquitted.

However, this study is not an examination of the veracity of the claims that moved the Mountain Valley panic forward. As the literature review made clear, the objective truth of claims is simply not the central task of social

problems research. Indeed, whether a claim is false or inaccurate is less important than the extent of the role it plays in the construction of social problems. Consequently, the actual number of victims and the specific nature of the allegations in the McMartin case are less important than the extent to which news accounts connected these claims to the Mountain Valley case.

The implications of this side-bar story is clear: Only two weeks after the meeting at the police station, before the McKinley County District Attorney had publicly announced any of the charges against Mark Simpson, a story about a widening investigation was already drawing a clear connection between the events in Mountain Valley and the "monsters" engaging in child pornography in California. It is these connections, which in the midst of a panic seem so obvious to the newswriters who make them, that help reinforce the notion that a community is facing, not one pathological deviant, but a wholesale assault on cherished values.

From Impact to Inventory:
A Community Continues the Struggle to Understand

Moral panics are periods of disorganization and confusion. Particularly at the point of impact, when people first struggle to evaluate the nature of the deviant threat, events seem to unfold in a random, unpredictable fashion. Indeed, a defining characteristic of these episodes is that the "facts" produced by newswriters -- often taken directly from official sources -- seem to emerge faster than people's ability to understand and connect them.

This is especially true for the impact stage of the panic in Mountain

Valley. While at this point in the account many of the actors have begun to understand at least the outlines of the deviant threat, new allegations and revelations -- functioning as social aftershocks -- will continue to buffet Mountain Valley, each challenging the community's ability to withstand new threats to stability. Indeed, the next chapter will describe a particularly explosive allegation about child pornography that shakes the community at its very foundations and moves the panic to a new level of intensity.

Yet, by the end of this roughly two week impact stage, the community and the newswriters seem to have become accustomed to the idea that a "new" form of deviance was in their midst. The news accounts have begun to imply a wide acceptance of the idea that child sexual abuse is a growing menace. The newswriters who began by quoting disbelieving parents have now turned to explaining and defining the nature of the threat. And the panic's spread has been facilitated by news accounts suggesting a connection between Mark Simpson's arrest and other cases of child sexual abuse around the country.

This is also the point when other newswriters are also about to enter the scene, having been lured by the quickly expanding events. Even Sally McDonald, whose lock on an official source has set the agenda for the early coverage of the case, is about to lose her monopoly. Editors at the Wilton Times, for example, will decide shortly that they can no longer afford the luxury of watching the Wilton American increase their readership while their reporters focus on the high road of official pronouncements. Soon several

Wilton Times reporters will enter the fray and make their own contribution to the definition and construction of the panic.

Eventually, in what Cohen called the reaction stage, the agents of social control will take center stage and take command of efforts to root out the deviance. For now, before any dramatic public trial can begin, all of the panic's participants must continue the struggle to understand and define the nature of the threat. Officials must complete their investigation of the alleged acts. And the newswriters -- in the panic's inventory stage -- will continue to produce even more accounts that imply a growing threat to the social order.

CHAPTER VI

"PROBE TURNS TO KIDDIE PORN:" THE INVENTORY STAGE

Shortly after the precipitating incident in a panic, after it becomes clear that the threat is not simply something that happens elsewhere, a community begins the struggle to understand and more fully define the nature of the deviance. Explanations are sought for exactly what happened, who did what to whom, why the events were allowed to happen, and whether they might happen again. Stated another way, a community moves the deviance from the margins of public consciousness to the realm of the possible, from what Walter Lippmann characterized as the "world outside" to the "picture in our heads" (1965). According to Cohen, the community

takes stock of what has happened and of their own condition. In this period, rumours and ambiguous perceptions become the basis for interpreting the situation. (1972:29)

This sometimes desperate search for explanations, in which rumors and distortion play such an important role, is what marks the inventory stage of a moral panic. The outbreak of deviance must be understood and integrated into each community member's cosmology. Not surprisingly, this is also the stage in which the press plays a key role, producing the news accounts that provide many of the urgently needed motives and definitions. Referring to the

inventory stage of the Mods and Rockers panic, Cohen describes the media's role at this stage:

I am concerned here with the way in which the situation was initially interpreted and presented by the mass media, because it is in this form that most people receive their pictures of both deviance and disasters. Reactions take place on the basis of these processed or coded images: people become indignant or angry, formulate theories or plans, make speeches, write letters to the newspaper. The media presentation of the Mods and Rockers events is crucial in determining the later stages of the reaction. (1972:30)

The "later stages of the reaction" referred to by Cohen is the final phase of the panic, when the agents of social control will take center stage and, responding to the wave of media attention, implement forceful and visible remedies. In the Mountain Valley case, the reaction stage will begin with Mark Simpson's trial, when McKinley County District Attorney William Hartnett becomes the focal point of efforts to root out the deviance. For now, while the prosecution continues to build its case, the press remains at the center of these pre-trial events and continues to produce the news that are the panic's raw material.

Indeed, the inventory stage may be the zenith of the press's influence in a moral panic. Notwithstanding the leaks from official sources that often begin just after the point of impact, much of the prosecution's investigation is conducted outside the frame of direct media scrutiny. While officials dispense occasional tidbits to satisfy the public's demands for action, such as Sally McDonald's story alleging as many as 20 victims, most of the prosecution's evidence is purposefully held back until the start of the trial. The result is that, during the pre-trial period, the press remains the primary definer of the panic,

continuing to search for revelations that will satisfy the public's need to understand the threat in their midst. Only when the trial takes place, and the full force of state power is brought to bear against the deviants, will the criminal justice system overshadow all other institutions playing a role in the panic. It is the period leading up to the trial that is the focus of this chapter.

Cohen describes three special characteristics of news that maintain the momentum of a moral panic during the inventory stage. These are (1) exaggeration and distortion, (2) prediction, and (3) symbolization. Each provided extensive fuel for the Mountain Valley panic, and will serve as the framework for this chapter's account of the inventory stage. In each section, a brief definition of the characteristic will be followed by an extended discussion of the role it played in the coverage of the events at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center.

Exaggeration and Distortion

Cohen begins his discussion of exaggeration and distortion with the statement of an editor he interviewed about the Mods and Rockers panic. Asked to explain the extensive coverage given the episode, the editor admitted that the events had been "a little over reported" (1972:31). Similarly, Carl Mason, an editor at the Wilton American, when asked to review some of the tabloid's headlines of Mountain Valley stories, remarked: "I cringe at some of the Mountain Valley front pages." It is this "over-reporting" that Cohen seeks to explain in his discussion of exaggeration and distortion. He writes:

The major type of distortion in the inventory lay in exaggerating grossly the seriousness of the events, in terms of criteria such as the number taking part, the number involved in violence and the amount and effects of any damage or violence. Such distortion took place primarily in terms of the mode and style of the presentation characteristic of most crime reporting: the sensational headlines, the melodramatic vocabulary and the deliberate heightening of those elements in the story considered as news. (1972:31)

One of the most important methods of exaggeration and distortion described by Cohen, the repetition of false stories, was especially important in the Mountain Valley panic. Long after being authoritatively discredited, these stories remained in circulation and provided much of the fuel for the panic's development. Even subsequent stories that disputed their reliability seemed only to spread them further. Cohen describes this phenomenon and emphasizes the extent to which false stories shape a panic and the subsequent public reaction to the deviance.

Another source of distortion lay in the publication, usually in good faith, of reports which were later to receive quite a different perspective by fresh evidence. The repetition of obviously false stories, despite known confirmation of this, is a familiar finding in studies of the role of the press in spreading mass hysteria...These stories are important because -- as I will show in detail -- they enter into the consciousness and shape the societal reaction at the later stages. (1972:33)

Indeed, the first such story in the Mountain Valley panic, occurring just one month after the initial revelations, was in some ways the defining moment of the entire episode, illustrating much of what Cohen was suggesting about the role of the press in the construction of a moral panic. Much of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the manner in which this story's publication expanded the Mountain Valley panic by connecting it to similar outbreaks of

deviance taking place in other American cities.

"Day-Care Kiddie Porn Probe" (Wilton American):
Mountain Valley is Connected to Other Outbreaks of Deviance

The search for a motive is a standard component of most criminal proceedings. Having first proven that a crime was committed, a prosecutor follows by proposing a plausible theory for the defendant's involvement. When such a theory is persuasive, it can convince a jury to vote for a conviction. However, more than simply meeting legal requirements, the search for a motive is also a fundamental part of how a community comes to terms with an outbreak of deviance. An unexplained, senseless event remains an open-sore, continuing to infect a community with panic and confusion. A credible motive, while not the complete antidote to such social disorganization, eliminates much of the mystery that has made the deviance so hard to accept, and leads the way to the appropriate remedies.

The community's search for a motive began in Mountain Valley on the first day the parents met at the police station. Numerous rumors circulated, including suggestions that the Simpsons were connected to organized crime and that they were involved in a massive national sexual abuse conspiracy. One month after the first story, however, child pornography was suggested as the most likely motive in a front page story by Pamela Barnes, Sally McDonald's colleague at the Wilton American. This story became a defining moment in the coverage of the Mountain Valley case, fueling the episode for the next several years and illustrating the media contagion that is characteristic of moral panics.

Bromley, Shupe, and Ventimiglia (1979) have written that "atrocities" are a typical component of moral panics. These tales describe events in which the putative deviants commit especially blatant and repulsive violations of cultural values. Whether true or false, atrocity tales

...(a) evoke moral outrage by specifying and detailing the value violations, (b) authorize, explicitly or implicitly, punitive actions, and (c) mobilize control efforts against the alleged perpetrators...(1979:43)

The child pornography story became the Mountain Valley panic's dominant atrocity tale, escalating public outrage and mobilizing a variety of social control measures. Given its importance to the present account, a substantial portion of the tale's first appearance is included here.

**"Mountain Valley Center Rocked by New Charges:
Day-Care Kiddie Porn Probe"
by Pamela Barnes**

The production of kiddie porn – video tapes of small children engaged in sex acts with adults – was a full-scale, behind the scenes operation at a Mountain Valley day-care center shut down by the state, sources close to the case said yesterday. The FBI has made contact with the Mountain Valley Police Department and has asked to be "kept informed" of developments in the case in the event investigators uncover interstate trafficking in child pornography.

"We have opened the doors of communication and are monitoring the situation," FBI spokesman Timothy James told the Wilton American.

Meanwhile, investigators probing allegations of abuse at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center have identified more than 25 children who were molested by staff members.

Children have told investigators that staff members and two adults not employed at the school took them off school grounds to a private home where they were filmed posing in the nude and performing sex acts with adults.

A number of children have described "cameras with wires coming out of them." Others said they posed for still photographs.

"It's becoming more and more obvious that they were manufacturing pornography here," said a source close to the investigation. "Almost every child we've questioned has said pictures were taken."

"The government can spend their money any way they want," defense attorney Thomas Marshfield said. "Of course they (the pictures) don't exist."

Before examining how this allegation fit within the dynamics of the larger panic, it is important to examine the story itself. What did readers learn about the events in Mountain Valley? How did it help create a sense of a widening threat?

While the headline refers to a "probe" that presumably might or might not have uncovered child pornography, the story immediately abandons any such cautiousness. Barnes asserts unequivocally that a "full-scale" pornography operation existed at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center. No qualifying language -- such as the use of the term "alleged" -- is used to suggest that this might remain a possibility rather than a certainty. Further, this assertion is made by a source "close to the case," who the some of the reporters suspected was the same police source that Sally McDonald had been using since the parent's meeting at the Mountain Valley Police Department. In other words, the same source is continuing to set the agenda for the coverage of the events, and has now begun to describe events as if they actually occurred.

The source has also again expanded the number of children alleged to be abused at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center. While several weeks before

he had told Sally McDonald that 20 children might have been abused, and the Wilton American had printed that it might have actually been "dozens," the source is now saying that 25 victims have been identified. Again, the number has grown before any official information has been publicly released.

Also, Barnes reports that the investigation being conducted by the Mountain Valley Police Department and the McKinley County District Attorney is now involving the Federal Bureau of Investigation. But the extent of the FBI's involvement, according to the story, is only that they have "made contact" with Mountain Valley authorities and are, according to an authoritative spokesman, "monitoring" the situation. Nothing in the story even subtly suggests whether the FBI finds the allegations to be credible. More than adding any useful information to the story, the introduction of the FBI expands the scope of the panic by moving it from a local to a national stage.

Defense attorney Thomas Marshfield's denial is included, yet is extremely brief in the context of the complete story. Only one of 25 paragraphs in the complete story includes information from the defense. Indeed, the lack of any other information from Marshfield suggests that, in printing the defense's denial, the Wilton American's reporter was probably engaging in what Tuchman called "objectivity as strategic ritual" (1972). By visibly adopting these rituals, which include printing comments about both sides of an issue and the scrupulous use of quotation marks, journalists are able to strategically cultivate the appearance of objectivity. By including Marshfield's denial,

Barnes was able to appear balanced, yet it was overwhelmed by the flood of certainty about child pornography.

What happened after the story was printed in the Wilton American? To use the journalistic vernacular, how did the story's "legs" facilitate the spread of the panic?

Newswriters Respond to the "Kiddie Porn" Story:
The Panic Spreads

James Redman of the Mountain Valley Courier was expected to be in the newsroom of his afternoon newspaper by 7:00 a.m. After stopping at the police station each morning to check the police blotter, engaging in what Fishman (1980) called the "justice round," he would make his way to the newsroom and often read the Wilton American and Wilton Times. If an important story appeared in either of these papers, he had until his 10:00 a.m. deadline to shape it into his own story. Redman usually worked alone and, as one of only several reporters on a small community daily, rarely had to submit stories to his overworked editor Drew Butler. As a new reporter working without much supervision, he often found himself in the position of improvising decisions about the Mountain Valley coverage. He remembers what it was like to cover the Mountain Valley case at such a bare-bones operation:

My editors at the Mountain Valley Courier then were either fading or they got them on the cheap. There was Drew Butler, who now sells real estate in downtown Wilton. It was shoestring. We used to call it the "Daily Miracle." I made virtually all my choices myself. I never met with an editor. And what really pissed me off was that I still had to come in and do

the cop-watch in the morning. At 7:00AM. I sometimes lost track of what tense I was in. It's tricky.

When he saw the Wilton American child pornography story, Redman immediately sensed its newsworthiness, and wrote his own version. Like all his colleagues, he preferred not to do such borrowing, but knew that he would not have time to independently verify it.

I felt terrible about it. But being so green, I remember thinking: What are my options? Ignore the Wilton American story? Develop my own source? What else can you do? You write "published reports said that Mark Simpson appeared as a clown and flew through the air." Hell, if I was Mark Simpson I'd be pissed off. You run it and hope that, if and when the Wilton American gets sued, they won't name us too.

I don't know who they had as a source. I had my own theories. But later I tried to develop my own sources. I found out that Hartnett, the prosecutor, went to the west coast to talk to the McMartin people. To investigate a coast to coast kiddie porn ring. That's a big story. But I felt uncomfortable concluding that it proved anything. I was uncomfortable with the Wilton American reporting. I knew they had a pipeline.

However, unlike the previous story from the Wilton American that he had been forced to borrow, this time Redman conspicuously credited the Wilton tabloid. In fact, his rewritten story was -- with one marked difference -- virtually an exact duplication of the Wilton American story. These excerpts from Redman's story begin with the lead paragraph:

"Day School Probe Turns to Claims of Kiddie Porn"
by James Redman

Staff members at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center -- using candy as bribes -- allegedly photographed and made movies of children engaged in sex acts with adults, running a large-scale child pornography manufacturing operation, the Wilton American reported today.

Pornography was produced at the Center and sold across state lines, the Wilton American reported.

The addition of the word "alleged" does pull back from the certainty of the original Wilton American story. But consider the extraordinary leap that Redman made in the second paragraph: The story claims that the Wilton American reported that pornography was sold across state lines. Yet the original story only stated that the FBI was monitoring the case in the event investigators uncover interstate trafficking in child pornography. In other words, in one day a different version of the story has already begun to spread, with "in the event investigators uncover" becoming "pornography was produced."

The Wilton Times did not get to the story until the next day, when they carried the denial of the FBI that it had received any evidence from the Mountain Valley Police Department of interstate trafficking in pornography. These excerpts begin with the lead paragraph:

**"FBI Says It's Not Active in Day School Probe"
(no by-line)**

The FBI has received no information so far from the Mountain Valley Police Department on whether the investigation of the Mountain Valley Day Care Center has turned up evidence of interstate transportation of pornographic material, a bureau spokesman said yesterday.

The Wilton American reported yesterday that the FBI had asked to be kept informed of developments in the case. Quoting "sources close to the case," the newspaper also reported that the production of videotaped child pornography was a "full-scale, behind-the-scenes operation" at the day school.

Again, this story also seems to pull back from the unquestioning stance of the

original story, stating that the FBI had not received any evidence. Yet the original Wilton American story had not stated with certainty that the FBI was active, only that it wanted to be kept informed. By using the phrase "so far," the story implies an ongoing investigation in which the expectation is that evidence will be found eventually. And the allegations are repeated again, this time in a nationally prestigious daily. On the same day, virtually all television and radio stations in and around Wilton also repeated the allegations.

What was not published in any of these stories, and was not yet known by the reporters, was that before the child pornography story appeared in the Wilton American, police had already obtained a warrant and searched the Mountain Valley Day Care Center and the residences of Mary, Mark, and Valerie Simpson for any evidence of child pornography. While a camera and rolls of film were seized, the story by Pamela Barnes appeared in the Wilton American before any of the photographs had been developed. This means that, when the police source gave the child pornography story to the Wilton American, he might have known whether the search had yielded physical evidence of child pornography.

In fact, one week later, police officials in Mountain Valley publicly announced that none of the seized photographs had depicted any sexual subject matter and that no evidence of child pornography had been obtained. Significantly, however, none of the newspapers devoted a special story to these findings. In each case, the results of the search were either buried in larger

stories or noted in a brief side-bar story.

Indeed, the pornography allegations remained very much a part of the Mountain Valley case, and while some children did eventually testify that they had been photographed by a camera with wires attached, no evidence of child pornography was ever introduced. Even prosecutor William Hartnett admits that no photographs or other evidence was ever found. However, for the next several years, the allegations continued to periodically appear in news accounts and in discussions among reporters. In fact, two years later, in an incident to be described in the next chapter, the still unsubstantiated allegations resurfaced as the subject of a dispute between District Attorney Hartnett and a skeptical Wilton Times reporter. What does the process leading to the publication of the child pornography story reveal about the role played by newswriters in the construction of a moral panic?

Publishing an Allegation:
Newswriters Explain the Process of Decision-Making

Several years after the fact, most of the newswriters continued to debate whether the child pornography story should have been printed. None doubted that, after it was printed, it had hovered over the entire episode and permanently affected public attitudes about the Mountain Valley case. At the same time, the respondents vividly recalled how the panic's competitive frenzy made them especially vulnerable to the allegations of child pornography at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center.

Carl Mason, an editor at the Wilton American, who called the repetition of

a discredited story "piling-on," admits that the child pornography angle turned out to be false, but defends the decision to report that it was being investigated. His faith in Sally McDonald's sources drove his decision to print the story:

By and large, we make a judgement as to how plausible the suspicion is. Sally, who wrote the story, had the best federal contacts of anyone in the city. When she said that the FBI was looking at this or that, I felt secure that it's for real. Whether we reported it depended on how plausible it seemed. We always tried to find out what the investigators were doing. Lots of stuff they pursued were dead ends. But our job was to put news in the paper and not keep it out of the paper. When you start to look for reasons to keep stuff out of the paper, you're treading a tough line.

Mason was asked whether seeking to "put news in the paper and not keep it out of the paper" can lead to false stories being planted by interested parties.

He agreed and referred to another unsubstantiated story in the Wilton American that he regrets printing. Yet he continues to defend the earlier decision. The interests of both his newspaper and the prosecutor in gathering all useful information were simply too similar to ignore.

It's true, the previous case reminded us that we can really be used by the prosecutors to help them with their investigations. We always refused to do this formally, but often in the newsgathering process, we wound up getting drawn into it because our interests and their interests were congruent. Looking back, I wonder if we would do the same thing with the "Kiddie Porn" story. My sense is we would. It was plausible.

Sally McDonald also remains convinced that she did the right thing. Her view of newswork, not unlike that of Carl Mason, is that as much news as possible belongs in the newspaper. In other words, if the investigation had begun to focus on child pornography, that fact was more important than

whether the allegation was true or whether its publication would somehow taint the investigation. To McDonald, determining the truth was less important than casting the widest possible net for publishable news about the Mountain Valley allegations.

Our job was to get as much information as we could about what they were looking at. Coming at it from a reporter's angle, we were trying to dig up as much information on what the complaints were that we could. I think it is someone else's job to worry about...These complaints were filed before the story was written. If, after this story was written, twenty other kids had come in and said Mark Simpson took pornographic pictures of me, it does raise the issue of whether they read it in the paper or not. When this story was written, they already had these complaints (about pornographic pictures). I don't want to sound so cavalier that it seems like I don't care about an investigation, and whether I compromise it or not, but my job isn't really to worry about their investigation but to do my job. My job was to get as much information as I could about what they were looking in to, what they were alleging. That's what we did.

McDonald also continues to believe that child pornography was somehow involved in the case. While conceding the lack of any physical evidence, the eventual testimony of the children about a camera with wires convinced her that there was some truth to the allegation.

That did come out at trial. There was evidence, the kids testified that they were undressed and that there was a camera with a wire attached to it, that they were photographed. It was obvious that the kids were referring to a video camera. That did play out. They never found any pornographic tapes. They did involve the US Postal Service. Most pornography goes out of the country. They don't really have a central system where they can cross-check pictures of the students. But there was...that was something that happened...there were allegations that there was kiddie porn. That's true.

Note, however, the quick shift that McDonald makes from "that was something that happened" to "there were allegations." Obviously, she is according an inherent legitimacy to officially produced allegations. To

McDonald, objective truth and official allegations are comparable concepts.

Steve Baylor, her colleague on the Wilton American, also defends the decision to publish the child pornography story. However, he also offers a fascinating, extended critique of past abuses at the Wilton American. Sometimes, he argued, published allegations were simply sensational fabrications constructed by reporters who would "concoct a theory." He explains in some detail how the tabloid did this "concocting."

On the other hand, there are the famous "what if" stories. The Wilton American was famous for them. Bait and switch stories. It's not unknown in the business for a reporter, in order to keep the story alive, to concoct a theory and say: Wouldn't it be something if this or that was involved? We had a reporter who would write a pure tabloid story like "Martians Land on Wilton City Hall Plaza, Administration Says." Then you read the story and it says that city hall officials say they are prepared for anything including a landing by martians. That if that happens the mayor will be there to meet them.

Another way of doing that is the unsourced story. Yesterday the Wilton American had a story saying that the Wilton Police Department is moving too slowly on the Chung case, some say. Totally fabricated. Who's setting the timetable here? I have this vision that there aren't a lot of people sitting around saying that they're really dragging their feet on this Chung case.

Yet Baylor's most revealing observation was his answer to one of the central questions of this study: How exactly did this false story spread? He explains how the reporters covering the Mountain Valley case, competing fiercely and interacting closely with their colleagues, were simply afraid to admit to each other that they didn't know about the child pornography allegations. Confronted with an allegation they didn't know about, they engaged in what might be called "feigned knowing."

You know how all this spread? Reporters are afraid to admit what they didn't know. They don't want to seem to be out of the loop. When reporters ask each other if they have heard something, they always answer: Yeah, I heard that. What did you hear? God forbid you should appear ignorant of anything that appeared on the planet that day. You think that, if you are really wired, you should know about this. So you always answer: "Oh yeah, how is he? How's he doin'? Then you have two guys sitting there and lying to each other.

Baylor's comment reveals that the desire to know is sometimes so strong that it leads a reporter to conceal his ignorance by exaggerating, or even lying, about an incident. Motivated by the need to appear knowledgeable, a reporter might prefer to simply reproduce an unsubstantiated fact. Indeed, the interactive situation he describes brings to mind the process of reflexivity described by Garfinkel (1967), and later by Mehan and Wood (1975). In a comprehensive review of ethnomethodological theory, social theorist Jonathan Turner describes a process that strongly resembles the "feigned knowing" described by the Wilton American reporter.

Much interaction operates to sustain a particular vision of reality. Even when the "facts" would seem to contradict a belief, human interaction upholds the contradicted belief... Much human interaction is reflexive. Humans interpret cues, gestures, words, and other information from each other in a way that sustains a particular version of reality. Even contradictory evidence is reflexively interpreted to maintain a body of belief and knowledge. (1982:405)

Clearly, the newswriters' desire to be perceived as competent and knowing substantially overshadowed their willingness to exercise skepticism and news judgement.

"If there's a report out there, you report it:"

The Wilton Times Spreads the Child Pornography Story

It might be assumed that the Wilton Times stayed above this pack mentality. Their organizational culture had long emphasized official pronouncements over the scramble for sensational tidbits. As it turns out, however, the child pornography story was one of several stories that led the management of the Wilton Times to seriously reconsider its coverage of high profile cases. In an increasingly competitive news environment, the newspaper's management began to realize that they could no longer cede sensational stories to the Wilton American. The result was that, after the child pornography story, the Wilton Times attempted to aggressively compete with the tabloid Wilton American and all the other media outlets in Wilton. The newspaper's editors even began to monitor local television news broadcasts for story ideas.

Charles Jackson, city editor at the Wilton Times, was largely responsible for this transition. In fact, he had arrived at the newspaper only several months before with the specific charge to strengthen local news coverage. Jackson was not at all reluctant to recycle the Wilton American's child pornography story. As he saw it, a case with this level of public interest could not simply be dismissed as the sole province of the tabloids. He believes that, during some periods, normal concern about factual verification is simply less important than the competitive scramble for every possible angle.

There are some cases where what is being pursued is as important as what

is being found. The Mountain Valley case registered very high on the interest and recognition level. Every possible line you can come up with, in terms of what's going to happen next, who's down, who's up, who's in, who's out, you report it whether you can confirm or not. If there's a report out there, you report it, you don't wait. Everything that's out there, given the hold on the public, you report it. We don't have to be right. That in fact is what's happening out there and we report it. We try to be fair and to try to exercise some judgement. And we try to be very discriminating.

This answer, in which Jackson is very open about his decision to print virtually anything his reporters could uncover about the Mountain Valley investigation, might have been expected from Carl Mason of the Wilton American. Coming from a senior editor at one of country's most prestigious daily newspapers, who frankly admits that "we don't have to be right," it reveals the intensely competitive atmosphere in which evaluations of fact were less valued than publishing all even remotely credible allegations.

The attorneys on each side of the Mountain Valley matter each have strong, if somewhat predictable, opinions about the impact of the child pornography story. Prosecutor William Hartnett, who vehemently denies that he was the source of the story, claims that its publication presented him with a serious problem. While he wanted to control a limited flow of information to the press, he worried that a story of this magnitude — if discredited — might discredit the entire case. In fact, he claimed to be more likely to ask a reporter not to run such a story.

As a prosecutor you don't want those kinds of stories. You are trying to do your investigation without being hindered by any impact the story is going to have. In general my focus is to tell them as much as you can. Bring them with you. But if you are pursuing an active investigation, I would be doing everything I can to keep that out. I won't hesitate to tell them that a

story would hurt. If it was a reporter I really trusted, I would tell them what the investigation was all about. Some I felt I could trust. Like Sally McDonald of the Wilton American or Les Osborn of the Wilton Times. I would clue them into upcoming indictments. Telling them: " This is off the record. Keep your ears open."

His opponent, defense attorney Thomas Marshfield, offers the expected response. The story, he claims, gave the prosecution an overwhelming advantage for the rest of the case. Even though no physical evidence ever surfaced to prove the Simpsons' involvement in child pornography, the introduction of the claim irrevocably tied the case to this larger social problem. The result, from Marshfield's point of view, was that his clients became stand-ins for all the people being accused of child sexual abuse.

There wasn't a shred of evidence about pornography. No one was charged with pornography. We later learned from other sources that they spent millions chasing photographs that didn't exist. We learned that they searched the house in Mountain Valley of a suspected pedophile. We didn't even learn about this until the trial. The judge ruled that we weren't entitled to the dry-well investigations, the empty hole investigations.

The child pornography story was the one thing we could not deal with from a press standpoint -- the suggestion of something much larger than any one was indicted for. When the Wilton American started reporting the suggestion of a broad based ongoing high volume pornography aspect, even suggesting a global scale at one point, that is when the government obtained for themselves the advantage that carried the day. Everyone became conditioned to the idea that, while there might be a problem accepting evidence with regard to one case, *what about all of them?*. That's where the case was won and lost.

The child pornography story clearly played a central role in the construction of the Mountain Valley panic. Like so much of the earlier coverage -- including the previously discussed side-bar stories connecting the Mountain Valley and McMartin cases -- it moved the local events to a national

stage on which outbreaks of putative deviance were beginning to take place with increasing frequency. And while the rumors of child pornography were later discredited, research on rumors reveals that subsequent denials are usually not recalled as clearly as original allegations (Kapferer 1990).

This same issue was also playing itself out on the panic's larger national stage: Just several months before the events in Mountain Valley, a virtually identical "kiddie-porn" episode occurred in the coverage of the McMartin case. Despite a failure to uncover any evidence of child pornography, the Los Angeles media also publicized the same type of allegations as if they were true. An analysis of the McMartin coverage revealed numerous similarities to the Mountain Valley case.

The headlines screamed "Kiddie Porn" even when the text of the stories revealed no finding of any such pornography. For example, on March 7, 1984, the Herald headlined "Police seize 'kiddie porn' evidence"; the Fontana Herald News headlined "'Kiddie Porn' taken from schools, homes"; The La Habra Daily Star Progress said "Police Seize 'Kiddie Porn' from pre-school, homes"; and the Pomona Progress Bulletin printed "Kiddie porn, arms seized in raid." None of the authorities actually claimed they had actually found pornography, yet the headlines indicated as much, and the quotations around "Kiddie Porn" hardly affects that impression. (Entman 1990)

Thus, with the publication of the child pornography story, Mountain Valley became, along with the McMartin and Jordan cases, one of twelve nationally publicized child sexual abuse cases in which a pornography motive was alleged (Charlier and Downing 1988). Further, this story appeared just at the time when the federal government was turning its attention to so-called "sex-rings" that brought pedophiles together to produce child pornography. Numerous state

and federal hearings were held, and – between 1983 and 1986 – 194 related bills were introduced in state and federal legislatures (Nathan 1991).

In other words, the labelled deviants gradually came to be defined in media accounts less as three people being tried for a serious crime than as conspirators in an expanding national morality play. Spread by newswriters who seemed more concerned about competing successfully with each other than with verifying facts, and bolstered by a growing national concern with child pornography, the story was one of the panic's defining moments.

"They Loved to Get the Word 'Sex' In:"
Misleading Headlines and Moral Panic

Related to the child pornography story, yet a distinct element of the panic's exaggeration and distortion, were the misleading headlines referred to in the analysis of the McMartin case. As several previously cited examples in the Mountain Valley case have made clear, headlines tended to exaggerate the content of stories in a direction that further expanded the atmosphere of panic. Lines of investigation, such as the child pornography allegation, were touted in front-page headlines as if it was certain that they had happened.

Cohen pointed to the important role that these headlines play in pressing a panic forward. Such headlines are

... those that "were discrepant with the actual story: thus, a headline 'violence' might announce a story which, in fact, reports that no violence occurred. Then there were more subtle and often unconscious journalistic practices: the use of the generic plural (if a boat was overturned, reports read 'boats' were overturned) and the technique, well known to war correspondents, of reporting the same incident twice to look like different incidents. (1972:33)

Obviously, the previously cited "Day Care Kiddie-Porn Probe" headline is an apt example of this technique. "Kid Sex Victims May Total 20," described in the previous chapter, also employs the generic plural described by Cohen that magnifies the number of people affected. But what did the study reveal about how and why such misleading headlines are produced during a moral panic?

Carl Mason of the Wilton American pointed out that there is a newsroom term for the act of writing a headline that exaggerates the subsequent story. Editors reading a story with an excessively tame headline will "jeep the head," or inflate it to a higher level of intensity. His reporter, Steve Baylor, remembers a number of occasions when he discovered that editors at the Wilton American had given a sensational headline to a relatively tame story.

I would write my little heart out, writing very clean prose. I would write in short declarative sentences that a person could easily read. And then there would be this 3" headline with a 2" story.

The other reporters echoed Baylor's complaint. In fact, each of the tabloid newswriters — Sally McDonald, Steve Baylor, and Carl Mason — felt that much of the criticism leveled at their coverage for excessive sensationalism was more a result of the headlines than the stories they wrote.

However, the most plausible explanation came from Mason, who described an institutional milieu in which these headlines became almost inevitable. Only months before, the family-owned Wilton American had been rescued from possible bankruptcy by Andrew Post, a wealthy investor. Schooled in the aggressive and sensational tabloid tradition, Post had imported a group of

editors and reporters to jump-start the sleepy publication. These new staff members immediately identified headlines as a tool that could increase the street-driven sales of the Wilton American.

With the new Post people, we had a clear division in this newsroom. Our writers and editors were all brought up in the standard journalistic tradition. We would try to be even-handed and skeptical. On the production side, we had a whole bunch of these new Post people. They loved to get the word "sex" in a headline or "kiddie." Loving to get all these flash headlines in.

At several points, the Post people attempted to intervene in the editorial process and actually shape stories. While an example of successful publisher intervention in the editorial process at both the Wilton Times and the Wilton American will be cited later in this account, Mason was able to resist these early attempts. Post backed off, but continued to intervene in the headline-production process. The result was a frequent discrepancy between a story's relatively sedate content and its headline. Mason described this process:

The practice was that they used all the space for the headline. Usually, this meant that they had five words. All the power was in the words or in the conjunction of the words. "Sex". "Kiddies." These guys were not above "jeeping" the heads. There wasn't much they could do with the stories, although there was some fucking around with the stories when they first arrived.

But, I can almost recreate what they must have said when they saw our Mountain Valley stories: "Gee, for such an explosive subject, this is sure a tame story. We'll "jeep" the head. Blow it up. I cringe at some of the Mountain Valley front pages.

Yet, in an interesting example of the impact of commercial considerations on the news product, after the first year of the Wilton American's Mountain Valley coverage these headlines gave way to a somewhat more sedate style.

Mason hinted that this was a purposeful attempt to acquire the kind of respectability and legitimacy that seemed to be monopolized by the prestigious Wilton Times.

Because the competition from the Wilton Times defines us, we began to go upscale in the course of this story. We started with these enormous headlines, and — by the time of the trial — we're starting to run with small two-deck headlines. You could see the paper in the process of changing.

While he offered no further explanation for this change, his reporter Steve Baylor was more forthcoming. Baylor had heard a revealing story about a meeting between the two largest retail advertisers in Wilton and Andrew Post. He described how the newspaper's content was purposefully altered to attract advertisers.

We were schizoid. We went back and forth. Somebody once said that we were born of a patrician mother and a psychopathic father. We were like the joke by George Bernard Shaw: With my brains and your looks, we could have a beautiful child. I'm sorry we got your brains and my looks. They tried to stick a tabloid onto a broadsheet.

When Post came to Wilton, we were bottoming out. He brought in lots of new people. They did all the big headlines. But after a while, they sat down and had a meeting with the J.M. Williams Department Store and Rebecca Ann's Emporium, our two largest advertisers, and asked why they didn't advertise in the Wilton American. They answered that they didn't want their products associated with the paper the way it was. That is supposedly when they asked these advertisers what they could do to change. Overnight there was a kinder, gentler Wilton American.

But the Post period was like walking into a frontier outpost that had been under siege. No money for pencils. No computers. Old typewriters. They were firing people but the people would leave without cleaning up their desk. There were half-eaten sandwiches. Copy was still in the typewriter. Every time they wanted an authentic newsroom, they would come to the Wilton American. It was really the "give me rewrite" kind of crap.

After the meeting with advertisers, court news got pushed off the front

page of the paper. All of a sudden, international news was on the front page. It was safe. It had the appearance of legitimacy.

In this case, headline writing – which played a key role in expanding the Mountain Valley panic – was directly influenced by commercial considerations. This was the case both when Post first saw such headlines as a way to attract readers, and later when his advertisers became uncomfortable with the excessive sensationalism.

How was this transition related to the life of the Mountain Valley panic? During the panic's impact and inventory stage, when the community was most likely to rely on media accounts to make sense of the events, the Wilton American headlines were still large and provocative. By the time the less sensational headlines were introduced, the panic had already moved into the reaction phase, when the criminal justice system took center stage as the dominant institution charged with rooting out the deviance. In other words, the headlines were the most sensational at just the point when the media's role was most central. Later, when the two advertisers concluded that sensationally publicized moral panics might not be good for business, the reporters were already focused less on gathering new revelations than on covering the trial.

So much of the debate over the "jeeped" headlines and "kiddie porn" allegations ultimately leads to basic questions of linguistic and symbolic representation: What language and symbols – endowed with what acquired power – were used to construct the accounts of the panic? As it turns out, this very issue was vigorously contested among reporters, editors, and publishers

in every newsroom in Wilton and Mountain Valley.

Symbolization

Moral panics are times of heightened symbolic activity. Individuals and institutions, often working to promote diverse versions of reality, endow words and images with special meanings that construct the notion that society's most cherished values are under attack. Again using the Mods and Rockers example, Cohen described this as a process in which these symbolically charged words and images function as labels that stigmatize the deviant acts and actors and even further place them outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

There appear to be three processes in such symbolization: a word (Mod) become symbolic of a certain status (delinquent or deviant); objects (hairstyle, clothing) symbolize the word; the objects themselves become symbolic of the status (and the emotions attached to the status). The cumulative effect of these three processes as they appeared in the inventory was that the terms Mods and Rockers were torn from any previously neutral contexts (for example, the denotation of different consumer styles) and acquired wholly negative meanings. (1972:40)

The newswriters in the Mountain Valley panic actively participated in the process of symbolization, and used such words and symbols as the raw material of accounts that advanced the panic. Language in particular became the symbolic terrain on which much of the episode's reality was contested and defined. Words such as clown, magic room, elephant, photograph, even the name Mountain Valley itself, became the linguistic representations of the evil that was threatening the community. Even the words used to describe the

abusive acts themselves became an important means of symbolizing and promoting the threat. Indeed, the choices made by the newswriters as to how they would describe these acts, often the result of substantial internal conflict within the newsgathering organizations, were a fundamental means by which the deviants and deviance was constructed.

Symbolization and the Vocabulary of a Panic:
Describing the Deviant Acts

Much of the account thus far has examined the role of language in both subtly and overtly constructing the notion that the spreading menace was part of a larger social problem. Each successive account during the impact stage seemed to increase the number of alleged victims. Phrases such as "tip of the iceberg" and "no one is sure how far it will lead" implied that the episode would continue to spread. Side-bar stories connected the Simpsons with the "monsters" in the McMartin case. Yet these obvious elements of the panic's construction masked a behind-the-scenes, often acrimonious, conflict among the newswriters over an even more fundamental issue of linguistic representation: What language would be used to describe the alleged acts and the body parts of the child victims?

For several months after the parents met at the Mountain Valley Police Department, media accounts provided little explicit details about the alleged acts. In other words, during the time that stories were regularly appearing alleging child pornography and connections to other sexual abuse cases, the only descriptions of the deviant acts relied on terms such as "rape," "sex

acts," "molest," "abuse," and "assault." While the early stories seemed to imply that the first alleged male victim had been anally penetrated, this was never specified. The child pornography stories in particular never specified what might have been depicted on the "videotapes of children engaged with sex acts with adults" (Wilton American). The respondents also suggested that neither the radio nor the television accounts described the alleged acts with any specificity.

Then, three months after the panic's impact, the final appeal by the Simpsons to reopen the Mountain Valley Day Care Center was denied. State social welfare officials, who had been carrying out their own investigation, released a report of interviews conducted with a number of alleged child victims. Citing numerous specific acts of child abuse, the state permanently closed the facility and revoked its license. The report, with its explicit descriptions of sexual abuse, was made available to the press.

The Wilton American reported the release of the report in a front page story. Under a unusually large headline, Sally McDonald's story used dramatic language to describe its findings. Yet, despite McDonald's reliance on words such as "explosive," "appalling," and "graphic," readers still were provided few explicit details. These are the first six paragraphs of her story:

**Explosive New Report in Day-Care Probe:
Kids Tell of Sex Abuse at Center
by Sally McDonald**

Appalling tales of adults performing deviant sex acts with children were revealed yesterday when state officials shut down a Mountain Valley

nursery school for good.

The Mountain Valley Day Care Center, a once-respected day-care center that had been in business for more than 18 years, lost its license to operate after a state judge ruled that four children – aged 3 - 5 – were molested by staff members.

The parents said the children were so horribly affected by their experiences that they began wetting their beds, having nightmares, sucking their thumbs and complaining of pain from the alleged acts.

State Judge Robert Emmett's decision identifies the alleged abusers as Mark Simpson, and sister Valerie Simpson, the son and daughter of school owner Mary Simpson.

Only Mark Simpson has been criminally charged with molesting a child.

Children were also molested by an unidentified person or persons who dresses as a clown, Emmett's ruling states.

James Redman of the Mountain Valley Courier also wrote an account of the report's release. Yet his story includes no explicit details of the alleged acts and relies exclusively on euphemisms. Neither did the reports filed by Annette Marshall (WMNO-Radio) and Carol Jones (WPQR-Radio) include explicit details. Yet, much to the surprise of its competitors, the Wilton Times printed a story with lengthy excerpts from the report. Written by a reporter who only wrote several stories about the case, the story provided readers with their first relatively unambiguous account of the allegations. This excerpt begins with the story's first paragraph:

**Mountain Valley Day Care Center Loses Its License
by Robin Campbell**

State Judge Robert Emmett yesterday recommended revoking the license of the Mountain Valley Day Care Center because of allegations

that two employees sexually abused four children between the ages of 3 and 5.

Emmett's report described a day care center with a "magic room" in the basement and a "secret room" upstairs where four children were repeatedly touched and sexually abused by Mark Simpson and his sister Valerie.

Emmett reported that last summer one of the children began acting strangely. He cried at night. He wet his bed. He fought going to day care. He had secrets about school he could not reveal.

In August, the child told the judge of this conversation:

"Did someone pull your pants down?" she asked.

"Yes," said the child.

"Who?"

"Mark woke me up and told me to pull my pants down. I told him no, but I did it anyway."

And according to Emmett, the child told his mother a bedtime story of being taken to a "secret room," of being undressed and his genitals squeezed by Mark Simpson, of penetration and attempted oral sex.

On another occasion, Emmett wrote, "While in the magic room after Valerie Simpson removed her clothes, Valerie Simpson kissed and touched another child's body."

Not all ambiguities are resolved by this account. Yet it was a notable exception in a news environment in which no other news outlet provided comparably explicit details. Indeed, until the trial began a year and a half later, all the news accounts relied exclusively on ambiguous euphemisms to describe each new revelation.

While the trial coverage will be the focus of the next chapter on the panic's reaction stage, it is important to note here that the issue of explicit

language continued to surface when the children finally began to testify. For the most part, the Wilton American, the Mountain Valley Courier, the two radio reporters, and the television reporters all chose to couch their stories in clinical euphemisms. However, the Wilton Times continued to occasionally use explicit language. Typically, their reporter Les Osborn would avoid his own recreation of the testimony and simply include verbatim testimony. This excerpt is typical:

**Girl, 5, Testifies in Sex Abuse Trial
by Les Osborn**

A 5-year-old girl who had been a pupil at the now closed Mountain Valley Day Care Center in 1984 testified yesterday that the owner's son touched her indecently and that a man dressed as a clown made her fondle him.

On the subject of being touched, the following colloquy ensued:

Q. When you were ion the magic room or the secret room, did Mark ever touch you on any part of your body?

A. Yes.

Q. (Handing her a doll) Can you show us where he touched you?

A. Here.

Q. What is that?

A. Vagina.

Q. And did he touch you in some other place?

A. Yes.

Q. Where?

A. Here.

A. Where is that?

A. The bum.

Q. Did the bad clown ever make you touch him?

A. Yes.

Q. Where did he make you touch him?

A. Penis (indicated the place on the male doll)

Later, the girl said that the bad clown made her perform oral sex on him.

Then, several weeks after the trial began, with no explanation, the Wilton Times suddenly stopped using explicit language. Indeed, for the remainder of the Mountain Valley coverage, until the final story appeared over three years later, there was virtually no consistency in the language used by the newswriters to describe the abusive acts. On one day, a story in a newspaper would appear describing the acts with no ambiguity whatsoever. On the next day, the same reporter would revert to the use of euphemisms. What was going on? How might the reporters' explanations for this phenomena help explain the definition and construction of moral panics? As it turns out, this precise issue was the subject of extensive debate among the newswriters.

Language as Contested Terrain: The Newswriters Explain

Sally McDonald was the first reporter to point out that this had been a matter of some contention between her editors and the Wilton American's new owner Andrew Post. Alluding to attempts by the Wilton American to shed its

vulgar image, McDonald described how she had been rebuffed in attempts to use explicit language.

If you read our stories with a close eye and the Wilton Times stories, you would think that we – as a tabloid – would really play up the sexual angle. Yet we were restricted in what we could write because the management was very conscious.. you know, of a tab being...it was a time when we were trying to get advertisers. They didn't want prospective advertisers to say: "Oh, my God, look at the sleaze they are writing." I couldn't use sexual words, thing that came out in court, descriptive words that the Wilton Times was able to use in their stories.

When asked to cite an example of how this intervention by management had affected her newswork, McDonald described several disagreements with her editors over the words "hymen," "vaginal," and "penis."

In fact, at one point, there was testimony by a doctor that there was obvious evidence of penetration because the girl's hymen had been ruptured. I couldn't use the word hymen in my story. I had to think of a way to write it. I mean how do you describe it if you can't use the word? I don't remember if I was even allowed to use "vaginal". I think I tried calling it a vaginal tissue.

I wrote the stories and they got to the city desk....I don't even remember if I could use the word "penis". How do you write about a sexual case if you can't use the words that are said? I had a real hard time getting the story across without using a lot of the words. Our stories were less descriptive, less graphic than the Wilton Times stories, even though our headlines were obviously more graphic.

Her colleague Steve Baylor had also come up against this informal prohibition at the Wilton American against excessively explicit details. As a crime reporter he had often been asked to remove descriptions of victims that editors feared would offend readers.

I once wrote what I thought was one of the great leads: A pathologist will testify that the victim was killed by a hammer blow so severe that white tissue from the deepest part of the brain was extruded.

My editor starts to yell at me: "We can't say extruded brain matter in a family newspaper. They'll lose their cookies over breakfast." It was ultimately boiled down into mush that said something about the blow being so hard that she could not have survived.

I had a gentleman who attempted suicide by shooting his penis five times. I remember writing something like: "When asked whether the shooting might have been accidental, the prosecutor responded that people do not tend to shoot themselves five times in the penis by accident." The editor came running out yelling at me that we couldn't say penis in a family newspaper. It ran with a reference to the upper thigh. And yet I could call a waitress in a bar a buxom drink slinger.

McDonald and Baylor traced this skittishness to their editors at the Wilton American. They were the ones, after all, who altered their stories in a more euphemistic direction. Yet editor Carl Mason provides a much more revealing account of how and why this issue of word choice became a matter of dispute. Mason had received a clear message about the kind of language that the management would find acceptable in the Mountain Valley coverage.

I don't mean to say that this story was titillating, but it was titillating in a news sense. And I remember very clearly that the management was always extremely opposed to putting these kinds of details in the story. He didn't think people wanted to open up their paper in the morning and start vomiting into their Cheerios. I was in the middle of all that. I felt that as a newsman I wanted to be as graphic as necessary to tell the story. I mean this wasn't the kind of graphic stuff that made you sick. All we wanted to say was penis, vagina, or whatever.

However, beyond this desire to avoid offending readers, Mason also felt constrained by the public's expectations of a tabloid. His response reveals that news production often involves a newsworker's subtle calculation of how a news account will fit with what consumers expect from a given news outlet. Because readers expected the Wilton American to be racier, and because the

newspaper was attempting to resist such a characterization, Mason felt he had to avoid reinforcing this perception.

I understand the opposite position. There's a weird dynamic between the Wilton American and the Wilton Times. The Wilton Times, because of its presentation, can get away with putting incredibly clinical details. We would be smacked for being exploitative and sensational for the exact same thing by the people who see us as a scandal sheet. In fact, sometimes they put in the details, we don't, and I hear people bitching about what the Wilton American did. They read the Wilton Times and remember that they saw it in the Wilton American. So over the years we have been banged around for things we haven't done. We'll be blamed for that anyway. So we have to be more careful than the Wilton Times about reporting that kind of stuff.

In fact, the more respectable image of the Wilton Times left editor Charles Jackson with much greater latitude to use explicit language. Yet what explains the sudden change to euphemisms just three weeks after the start of the trial? Again, the respondents from the Wilton Times pointed to a direct intervention by management. Apparently, the newspaper's Managing Editor Matthew Gary began to get complaints from friends and neighbors about the explicit stories being written by Les Osborn. The Wilton Times stories, which often quoted the trial transcript at length, included numerous references to body parts and alleged acts of abuse. While Gary asked City Editor Charles Jackson to stop using words such as "penis," "vagina," or "anus," he provided no further guidance about how to write the stories. The result was that Osborn and Jackson often found themselves fending off Gary's attempts to alter the language in stories.

This episode provides a fascinating example of the almost ballet-like

negotiation that takes place between reporters and editors. Jackson first told Osborn that he would have to stop using explicit language. Yet because Jackson wanted to avoid seeming heavy-handed, he suggested that he wouldn't have to edit the offending words from Osborn's stories if Osborn didn't use them in the first place. While Jackson left the door open to such language if it was "essential," neither party left the meeting knowing what "essential" meant. The result was a somewhat ambiguous resolution in which Osborn agreed to address the problem on a "case by case" basis. Osborn recalls the episode:

Finally Jackson came down and said: "Les, I don't want to have to edit it, but Matthew Gary is getting heat from his friends and neighbors who want to know why we have to be so explicit. The Wilton American seems to be able to write the stories without it, why can't we?" So I stopped. We agreed that I would only be explicit if it was essential. We did it on a case by case basis. Before that, I felt no constraints. I thought this was a criminal case being written for adults. I still disagree, but I could see their point of view.

From Osborn's version, it seems that Jackson was struggling to relay the message without issuing a direct order. Jackson was not happy with Gary's intervention, but he felt he had to go along with the request. He did feel, however, that not using the words was a disservice to readers who were trying to decide the truth of the allegations.

One day, out of the blue, Matthew Gary told me to tone it down. He said it was too graphic and that we are the arbiters of taste. That just because it's out there and it is said doesn't mean that we put it into the paper. That we are not out there to make judgements. To them, some of the descriptions didn't pass the taste test. Obviously, we did what the editor said. In a case like this, though, where many people are trying to make judgements about whether the allegations were true or were they just in the minds of the kids, they needed to know what's being said. Especially in a case where the readers are hanging on to almost every word, they need to get it fairly

unadulterated.

Jackson also felt that the Wilton Times -- given its prestigious reputation -- had to consider the impact of news on readers. In fact, the sensibilities of young readers were a special concern:

But newspapers have to aim for the lowest denominator. The eight year old who is just starting to read and doesn't know how to read a newspaper and thinks he's supposed to read everything. I'm not sure I want my child reading about penises being inserted into somebody's bum until I'm ready. The paper was trying to say that it is a privilege to be invited into people's homes, some people don't want their kids exposed to it, and we have to be careful to guard that. I think that's a judgement that an editor has to make.

James Redman at the Mountain Valley Courier faced the same issue. Yet his response is a telling example of how reporters, having sensed the likely reaction from management, censor themselves prior to any direct intervention. He was so certain that his publisher Sidney Seawright would object that he never even tried to use explicit language. Seawright had already sent a number of messages about the Mountain Valley coverage, and Redman decided to avoid a likely conflict.

But I didn't do it. I thought at the time: If I do it, the editor will either be too stupid or timid to do anything about it. He'll leave it in and Seawright will get one phone call from an old friend whose old wife read it and fainted on the floor. Then I'd be called on the carpet by Seawright, the publisher. And he was a screamer.

This reminds me. Mary Simpson was a respected member of the community. She was friends with the Seawrights. I tread a very fine line. Simpson would call Seawright to bitch about destroying her son and ruining her business. Seawright was very inept. His mind began to leave him in the early 80's.

Seawright was never obvious, but I'd catch some informal shit like: "You make sure you talk to that defense lawyer." Sometimes it would get back to

me that Seawright got a call from Mary Simpson. But there really wasn't much direct contact.

Before discussing the significance of this issue for a moral panic, it is worth noting that the issue of language was not even debated among the television and radio reporters. Those interviewed simply knew that such language would simply be unacceptable to their editors. Both Annette Marshall of WMNO-Radio and Carol Jones of WPQR-Radio knew that their reports were less useful to listeners without such details, but felt that the immediacy of live radio precluded the use of anything even remotely offensive to listeners.

Marshall resented the greater freedom of her print colleagues:

Newspaper reporters can write penis and we can't say it. They can get away with a lot more. While legally we could do it, this is radio. The problem is that you get, god forbid, into the business of offending listener's sensibilities. They hear it live, immediately, and don't have the option of turning us off fast enough. In a newspaper, when you read the first paragraph of a story, you can decide that it's going to be disgusting and put it down. In radio, by the time you realize what the story is about, you've heard it. If it's going to offend you, you've already been offended. You have to keep that in mind when you're doing these stories.

Carol Jones shared this belief, but fought even more aggressively than Marshall to get the details in her live reports.

I had constant conflicts with my editor and news director about whether or not I could use clinical language. I have to tell you that I never won. The farthest I was able to go was to say that graphic testimony had been given. I was probably less able to be explicit than any of my colleagues.

"We Couldn't Say Penis in a Family Newspaper" Implications of Ambiguous Language for a Moral Panic

While the newswriters would have preferred to be explicit, they either were told directly not to use such language or knew that, if they did, they

would face almost certain objections from management. For the most part, they felt that the more people knew about evil, the more likely it was that they would exert pressure on their government to respond accordingly. Les Osborn stated this view quite eloquently, and cited another recent story to make his point.

I run into this as much with blood as with sex. Recently we had a decapitation. A drunken motor boating incident. I fought with the editors to say that the woman was decapitated. I maintain that, as a newspaper, we have an obligation to see that the bad parts of society are not sanitized. If people don't know that there is evil, they will be less resolute in enjoining their leaders to combat it.

I once had a story about a man who drugged his girlfriend and little girl, took them to the forest, and made them pose naked with a police baton and 44 magnum up their vaginas. I tried to get it through and they didn't even run the whole story.

Yet Osborn went beyond simply arguing that gruesome details would encourage readers to lobby for remedies. When speaking about the Mountain Valley case in particular, Osborn and several other newswriters also saw themselves as moral crusaders (Becker 1963; Gusfield 1963), publishing detailed stories to warn people of the threat in their midst. In other words, their own outrage about child sexual abuse also fueled their attempts to write detailed and explicit stories. Here the newswriters seem to move from simple chroniclers of events to active crusaders against the crime. Osborn explained this role:

You are not going to get any laws passed that will ameliorate some evil if you don't report what happens to little children. I felt we had to tell people what did happen in a day care center. Without it, the reader may have been left with the impression that the evidence is shaky, that these were merely

spanked, that somebody merely wiped their rear end when they messed themselves. I felt we should say that the clinical evidence showed that the child's vagina showed reddening. I feel it's sometimes necessary to say that the child had oral sex forced on him. People don't understand how you rape a little boy.

Clearly, Osborn – who wrote much of the Mountain Valley coverage for a prestigious daily – saw his role as educating the reader about the dangers of child sexual abuse. Further, rather than simply reporting on the case as something that may or may not have happened, Osborn believed he was describing what "*did* happen in a day-care center" and helping society "ameliorate some evil." Here he becomes an active participant in the definition and promotion of deviance, a role particularly well suited to the construction of a moral panic.

The other newswriters felt a similar moral revulsion about child sexual abuse and occasionally assumed the role of moral crusader. For example, whether or not it was true, Sally McDonald of the Wilton American was perceived by many of the respondents as supporting the parents of the alleged victims. Like Osborn, she saw part of her role as publicizing the effects of child sexual abuse. At one point, she wrote sympathetic profiles of several of the child victims that were seen by the supporters of the Simpsons as biased. Whether or not the stories were biased, McDonald's response reveals her crusading stance:

I wrote the stories from the parent's perspective on how this had changed their lives. And I remember the defense lawyer saying to me: Oh, I hope you're not going to run more of those stories. You know I felt those were valid stories. There was a lot of anger from the Simpsons about those kind

of stories. They didn't want to face up to the fact that there was an impact on these kids. They thought my stories were real tearjerkers. They couldn't face the fact that these kids had pain.

There is another way that this struggle over language might have helped advance the moral panic. Applying the work of Garfinkel (1967) and Cicourel (1973), Fishman (1980) examined how reporters detect and "fill-in" missing information in bureaucratic accounts. Confronted with an ambiguous or unclear account, a newsworker will use

...typifications of objects, actors, and actions to make sense of, and to see irregularities in, the accounts they receive...Reporters see participants in the events they investigate as social types with typical interest and motives, likely ways of acting and so forth. (1980:109)

While Fishman was writing about newsworkers, the same process can be applied to news consumers in a moral panic. The consumers of panic news were constantly presented with media accounts offering incomplete explanations of events. In particular, euphemisms and obscure language often raised more questions about the allegations than they answered. It seems highly likely that these media consumers, who as Cohen suggested are especially desperate during a moral panic to explain and understand the deviant threat, were likely to "fill-in" missing information using many of the same culturally-defined typifications as the newsworkers covering the events in Mountain Valley.

Further, while this study did not examine audience effects, there are several reasons to suspect that media consumers might have "filled-in" these euphemisms with details that were even more ominous than what actually

happened. First, many of the most dominant typifications at the time were overwhelmingly oriented toward the notion that children were in peril (Best 1990). In such an atmosphere, it would be unlikely that many media consumers would "fill-in" such ambiguity with less menacing details. Also, much of the research on panic cited by Cohen found that ambiguous rumors and other stimuli are almost always interpreted in ways that confirm, indeed escalate, the reality of the panic (Barker 1965; Medalia and Larsen 1958; Parker and Greenberg 1965). Vague and imprecise language -- especially during a moral panic -- served as a symbolic vessel in which people's fears and concerns about the deviant threat were invested.

The next chapter will examine the issue of emotions and revulsion among the newswriters and illustrate the implications of these feelings for how they constructed their news accounts. For now it is sufficient to note that several of the most visible reporters willingly assumed the role of moral crusader, and -- in warning readers of the dangers of child sexual abuse -- helped construct the Mountain Valley panic. Further, their accounts -- which often relied on ambiguous, euphemistic language -- left readers with considerable room to "fill-in" details that news accounts had not supplied. The result was that the atmosphere of panic continued to advance, and almost completely edged out the few voices urging caution or skepticism.

Clowns, Magic Rooms, and Naked Games:
Connecting Mountain Valley to the Panic's Larger Symbolic Universe

The struggle over explicit language in the news accounts was not the only

example of symbolization that advanced the panic. The inventory stage was also the point when many of the Mountain Valley news accounts began to appropriate a highly charged repertoire of dramatic symbols that -- throughout the United States -- had come to represent the expanding threat of child sexual abuse. Cohen suggested that these objects came to be symbolic of both the deviant status and the emotions attached to the status. The use of these symbols advanced the Mountain Valley panic by connecting the local case to other cases using similar symbols.

While the Mountain Valley coverage contained numerous references to clowns, abused babies, and naked games, each of which can be seen in the coverage of many of the 36 cases identified by Charlier and Downing (1988), perhaps the most pertinent example is the so-called "magic room" at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center. More than any other example, the "magic room" was a term "torn from any previously neutral contexts (for example, the denotation of different consumer styles) that acquired wholly negative meanings" (Cohen 1972:40).

One of the first appearances of the "magic room" was in a story by Sally McDonald in the Wilton American. Written several months after the panic's impact, the story described a visit to the Mountain Valley Day Care Center by investigators.

**Officials Tour Mountain Valley Day Care Center:
Bathroom Identified as the Day-Care 'Magic Room'
by Sally McDonald**

The "Magic Room" in the Mountain Valley Day Care Center, where children allegedly were molested and photographed was identified as a bathroom yesterday during a tour of the school.

The windowless room with three doors leading into classrooms and a hallway was carefully examined by a state hearing officer reviewing an appeal of the closing of the Mountain Valley Day Care Center.

On the same day, the Wilton Times ran a similar story that referred to the "magic room." Within days, virtually all the outlets were using the term. By the time of the trial, the attorneys on each side were using the term in statements to the press and in their examinations of witnesses. The "magic room" clearly became a key item in the culture of the Mountain Valley panic, and -- when the respondents were interviewed several years later -- they were still referring to the "magic room" as the place where the worst abuse had occurred.

At least 12 of the cases identified by Charlier and Downing involved special rooms or locations in which the alleged abuse took place. These included tunnels, bathrooms, "magic" or "secret" rooms, and basements. The McMartin case, with which Mountain Valley was sometimes compared, allegedly involved secret tunnels, although extensive excavation failed to verify their existence. Some have suggested that references to magic and the supernatural had special resonance at a time when urban legends about satanism were beginning to spread with increasing frequency (Martin and Fine 1991; Rowe and Cavender 1991).

Many of the friends and supporters of the Simpsons see these symbols as

evidence of innocence. Several years after the case ended, they were still trying to convince reporters to investigate these connections. One friend of the Simpsons kept a file with every similarity to the McMartin case, as if they proved a conspiracy. Researchers who have studied the period (Nathan 1991; Victor 1993), use these similarities as evidence of a witch hunt that led to the conviction of innocent people. Excerpts from a recent study of ritual abuse provide a concise statement of this position:

The McMartin case began with proliferating allegations of hundreds of children being subjected over a period of years to rape, anal, oral, and group sexual activity, pornography sessions, naked games, animal mutilations, baby killings, cannibalism, trips to secret tunnels, and transportation to distant places, sometime by airplane -- all done in the context of Satanic rituals....

The ritual abuse scare is the social creation of a late twentieth century witch hunt. There is no verifiable evidence for claims about a Satanic cult ritual abuse conspiracy. However, there is abundant evidence that an increasing number of moral crusaders are creating a form of deviant behavior, which exists only in their preconceptions. (Victor 1993:116-117)

The question of guilt or innocence is outside the scope of the present study. Indeed, the simple existence of similarities between cases does not prove or disprove anything about a specific allegation. Neither does the absence of a "ritual abuse conspiracy" in and of itself exonerate a given defendant. Yet, whether or not the Simpsons were guilty, the similarities cited above did connect the case to a larger symbolic universe in which child sexual abuse was rapidly emerging as a perceived national threat. In fact, during the same year that the "magic room" became a staple of the Mountain Valley coverage, the ABC television program "20/20" -- which at the time had an

average audience of 22 million viewers -- further spread these supernatural references in three broadcasts about the growing menace of satanic and ritual abuse (Charlier and Downing 1988).

Much like the child pornography allegations, the use of symbols such as the "magic room," the "clown," and "McMartin" in news accounts advanced the panic by implying that the deviance in Mountain Valley was connected to a larger conspiracy threatening the entire country.

Prediction

"More Day Care Centers Closed by State" (Wilton Times): Predicting Further Outbreaks

Throughout the life of a moral panic, news accounts predict that what has happened will almost certainly happen again. This inevitability of recurrence is typically suggested by a plethora of officials and experts who emerge to make pronouncements about the threat. Newswriters repeatedly seek out these experts, and frequently refer to their ominous predictions in news accounts. Further, because virtually all of the predictions suggest that the threat is getting worse, those claiming that the danger might have been exaggerated are considered heretical. As Cohen wrote:

...discrepancies between expectations and reality are resolved by emphasizing those new elements which confirm expectations and playing down those which are contradictory. (1980:39)

During the year after the panic's impact, side-bar stories -- mentioned in the previous chapter as a key tool of panic construction -- began to make precisely the sort of predictions that Cohen suggested was typical of a panic's

inventory stage. These predictions reinforced the notion that Mountain Valley faced a worsening epidemic and that further outbreaks were inevitable. They also continued to imply that the events in Mountain Valley were part of a larger national problem. The following headlines and lead paragraphs — each appearing in the several months after the initial allegations — are illustrative:

Child Abuse, Neglect Reports Are Seen on the Increase
by Phoebe McGee
Mountain Valley Courier

Reports of sexual abuse or neglect of children by the state with local district attorney's offices have increased since the so-called "DA Reporting Bill" took effect in 1983, spokesperson Amy Del Rio said Tuesday.

State May Follow New York With Teacher Fingerprinting
by Sally McDonald
Wilton American

Anxious state officials are looking closely at a proposed New York City law requiring fingerprints and criminal checks of adults working in day-care centers.

33 Child Abuse Investigations Started by State Since September
by Stephanie Ronald
Wilton Times

Since the first stories of sexual abuse at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center were reported, the state has begun 33 investigations into allegations of child abuse at day-care facilities throughout the state. Elizabeth Whitney, director of the State's Child Welfare Office, said: The public should not be unduly alarmed. The increases are the result of heightened public awareness of this problem and new interagency procedures.

Public Awareness Credited for Day-Care Abuse Reports
by John Mark (Associated Press)
Wilton Times

State officials say a heightened awareness of the sexual abuse of

children may be in part responsible for increasing reports of troubles at state day care centers.

These stories clearly imply that the increasing reports will continue to increase and do not address whether the increased reports mean that actual abuse is increasing. Such subtle questions are a casualty of moral panics and are overwhelmed by the flood of stories depicting the advancing threat.

From Inventory to Reaction:
The State's Response Begins

For close to two years, the coverage described in this chapter continued on almost a daily basis. Before the trial could begin, a number of issues had to be resolved, including how many children would actually testify and whether the three defendants would be tried separately. Chance meetings in Mountain Valley between each side's supporters led to verbal, and even physical, conflict. Prosecutor William Hartnett continued the search for evidence of child pornography, but none was found. And stories continued to appear suggesting a link between the Mountain Valley and McMartin cases.

One result was an increase in child sexual abuse cases reported to state child welfare officials. Indeed, this growth itself became the subject of numerous stories and further created the impression of a growing menace. Several months after the initial allegation, in a story used by both the print and broadcast media in Wilton, the Associated Press reported that the state was responding to increasing reports of abuse by bolstering control efforts.

Wilton Continues to Get Reports of Day Care Abuse
by John Mark (Associated Press)
Wilton Times

As a grand jury investigates alleged sexual abuse at a Mountain Valley day care center and a former aide in a Becksville center awaits trial on charges he molested young pupils, state officials continue to receive new reports of abuse.

"Substantiated" reports of abuse of 50 to 75 children at 35 facilities have been filed since September 1 with the state, spokesperson Amy Del Rio said Friday.

In recent months, partly in response to attention focused on the investigation, the staff of licensors who check out prospective day care operators have been increased from 25 to about 35. Two investigators have been hired to augment the three member legal staff.

Of the 35 facilities that have been under investigation since the fall, four are closed -- in Becksville, Mountain Valley, Seymour, and Frantown.

Whether or not the increase in reports represents an actual increase in the incidence of abuse is not known. Becker (1963) and Scott (1967, 1969) demonstrated how agencies often justify their existence by overestimating deviance in certain categories and broadening definitions to include more persons or activities. These increases are then used to justify increased resources for enforcement. Yet whether or not child abuse was increasing, these stories added further fuel to the panic. And when officials responded by increasing child welfare staff, these news accounts became "real in their consequences" (Thomas 1928).

Now the Mountain Valley panic approaches the reaction stage. For much of the time leading up to the trial, prosecutor William Hartnett and his team

were less visible than the defense, doling out occasional bits of information to reporters, but largely choosing to quietly build its case outside the scrutiny of the media. The newswriters continued to nurture their small network of anonymous official sources and reported on the course of the investigation. Eventually, almost two years after the initial allegations, the trial began in the McKinley County Courthouse under the supervision of Judge Martin Solway.

During the reaction stage of a moral panic, a highly publicized trial serves as much more than a formal legal proceeding. Having constructed the deviants as folk-devils attacking our most cherished values, society must now publicly and dramatically erect the moral barricade that will separate the deviants from the rest of the community. Trials are the stage on which this is accomplished, visibly reminding us of the severe sanctions that the deviants will receive. As Erikson wrote: "morality and immorality meet at the public scaffold and it is during this meeting that the line between them is drawn" (1966:12).

CHAPTER VII

"LISTEN TO THE CHILDREN'S TESTIMONY:" THE REACTION STAGE

Much of the panic's deviance-defining activity was complete by the time that Mark Simpson's trial began in the McKinley County Courthouse. Repetition of discredited child pornography allegations had spread the notion that the Simpsons were participants in national network to distribute lewd photographs of children. Numerous symbolically-charged references in the Wilton press to "clowns" and "magic rooms" -- already a part of the burgeoning national vocabulary of the panic -- had connected the events in Mountain Valley to other cases of child sexual abuse in day-care settings. Misleading headlines and side-bar stories had implied that child sexual abuse was a growing menace. And the continued reliance on ambiguous language in news accounts had created a fertile atmosphere in which the community could fill-in more ominous details.

All of these developments set the stage for the panic's reaction stage. Having constructed the problem of child sexual abuse as a spreading epidemic, the state was now ready to respond using appropriately drastic and visible measures. The deviant actors, having been defined as the panic's folk devils, were now to be punished for their serious breach of the community's most basic values. As Cohen wrote:

...these sort of techniques also involve the control agents in the 'dramatization of evil'. Deviants must not only be labelled but also be seen to be labelled; they must be involved in some sort of ceremony of public degradation. The public and visible nature of this event is essential if the deviant's transition to folk-devil status is to be successfully managed. (1980:95)

The McKinley County Courthouse was the terrain on which this "dramatization of evil" would take place (Tannenbaum 1938). Located between near downtown Wilton, it became the focal point for the remainder of the Mountain Valley panic. Remaining news accounts would focus exclusively on the trial. The newswriters would limit their field of action to the courthouse. And, from this point until the episode ended several years later, the central characters in the morality play would be the Simpson family, the children who would testify against them, and the two attorneys.

Cohen, quoting from Erikson (1966:103), suggests that courts are the ideal setting for the dramatic culmination of moral panics. These awe-inspiring settings, presided over by a robed representative of the state, are designed precisely

... for acting out society's ceremonies of status degradation. These are encounters where each side knows its lines, and, as Erikson comments on a church trial during Puritan times 'when the whole affair is seen as a ceremony and not a test of guilt, as a demonstration rather than an enquiry, its accents and rhythms are easier to understand. (1980:106)

One of the most striking characteristics of the panic's reaction stage was the suddenness with which it began. In a matter of days, all eyes turned to the courtroom. Before moving to an examination of newswork in the panic's reaction stage, it is important to understand the suddenness with which this

stage began. In a matter of days, reporters who had nurtured official sources and scrambled for every competitive advantage quickly moved their sole field of action to the McKinley County Courthouse. What explains this sudden shift?

The Pre-Trial/Trial Distinction:
Phase Structures in a Moral Panic

On the eve of the trial, over a year and a half after the initial allegations, the newswriters were still trying to come up with new angles. A number of leads were pursued, but nothing especially dramatic was uncovered. Then, on the day the court convened to begin jury selection, most of the aggressive newsgathering ground to a halt as the community members and the newswriters turned their attention to the trial. Clearly, the power of the state had now taken center stage. Sally McDonald of the Wilton American, perhaps the most aggressive and enterprising of the newswriters, describes this sudden shift:

It's one thing before the trial. Before the trial you dig and you dig. You get comments and you try to write balanced stories. But when you cover a trial, your job is to cover what goes on in the courtroom. It's not necessarily to come outside...I'm writing for the public what the jury is hearing. I mean, I sat in court and really didn't need anyone else's interpretation because my job is to be objective and to go in and cover what the witness said.

This seems an apt illustration of what Fishman called a "phase structure."

Phase structures are ideal-type sequences in which occurrences unfold and

...originate from and are in common use within the specific agencies or reporters' rounds. Bureaucratic phase structures describe events as they are formally produced and processed by the bureaucracies the reporter covers.

They also represent the reporter's own basic knowledge of events on the beat. (1980:58-63)

Fishman gives special attention to how the phase structures that guide newsgathering roughly resemble the criminal justice system's bureaucratic phase structures. These "socially sanctioned schemes of interpretation" -- which typically move from arrest to trial to sentencing -- organize the process of newsgathering by providing a clear expectation of what will occur at each phase.

The present study revealed that, during the trial stage of the panic's criminal justice phase structure, the reporter's enterprise became secondary to the court's rules and rituals. The period leading up to the trial was one in which scrambling for new allegations was seen as entirely appropriate. Indeed, both the prosecution and the newswriters were conducting parallel investigations of the Mountain Valley case, each designed to detect new allegations about the alleged deviants. Further, the newswriters saw it as entirely appropriate during this pre-trial phase to express skepticism, both in their stories and while speaking with other parties, about the evidence leaked by either the defense or the prosecution. In fact, the comments of some of the reporters could just as easily have come from investigators for the prosecution:

I do remember trying to do a lot of digging. We contacted people at the school. We contacted the Simpsons. We were over there interviewing neighbors on all sides of the issue, trying to locate teachers who used to work at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center, who still worked at the school, family members.

Yet this attitude of skepticism and exploration ended abruptly when the trial

began. For the reporters, the trial signaled the point at which the court took over as the legitimate forum for the determination of truth. Cloaked in what Hartley called the "mantle of impartiality," the court became an ideal forum for the newswriters to appear to be doing their work in a fair and objective manner (1982:55). Carl Mason of the Wilton American describes the shift from pre-trial to trial coverage:

The days when the case broke were scramble, scramble, scramble. We had a small staff. When the trial came, I was relieved. Now we're not out on a limb, but in a controlled atmosphere. A place where the testimony in court is all anybody gets. We can begin to withdraw from our role as investigators. Although that's the nature of the criminal justice system. The state runs the show.

... I think that there is a certain rhythm to all stories. The rhythm is a rut. You go out chasing when everybody is chasing. At a certain point, the story begins to slow down, usually right before the trial as the prosecution and defense hunker down. They are not in daily contact with reporters. You could keep digging at this point, but it's not easy. Usually, you feel that, by the time the trial comes, you have done all the investigation that you can. Also, as you are sitting in court, there usually are two or three other stories that are popping up that are generating the same level of interest.

Indeed, a recent work suggests that, by focusing all attention on legitimate legal authorities and allowing the state to "run the show," newswriters

...go a long way toward making convincing the image that they are an objective, impartial, universal, and general voice of the people. They can rely on the same properties in the law as a cultural product to convey the image that they, too, are a neutral, objective arbiter of conflicts in the world. (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987)

It would be overstating this point to suggest that the newswriters simply threw up their hands during the trial and ceded the fact-finding function to authorities. Indeed, they did write some stories pointing to inconsistencies and

contradictions in the testimony. In the case of the children's testimony, which will be described later in this chapter, maintaining this skeptical stance was a special challenge. Yet, while they did not completely suspend their skepticism, they did feel enormous relief that — after an intense period of often improvised scrambling — the court's rules and rituals would finally apply. Because they would now be guided by someone else's rules, their newswork was simplified, much of the pressure to develop new leads was eased, and a level playing field was provided on which all the reporters could equally compete. Carol Jones of WPQR-Radio, who was especially active during the trial, best expressed this sense of relief.

The trial came as a big relief. That's when a lot of rules took over, rules about what we can and can't do. The scrambling stopped and we focused on the evidence and the testimony. It was much clearer. Our task was much clearer.

Further, because these rules "about what we can and can't do" essentially stopped all newswork other than reports on the prosecution's case against Mark Simpson and the defense's response to that case, the trial began a phase in which the agenda for virtually all that followed was set and defined by the state. This advanced the progress of the panic by making it even less likely that alternate views could emerge. Paul Paley, a reporter for the Wilton Times who eventually became the only reporter skeptical of the charges, described the state's advantage at this point:

There is a certain mystique that attaches to the prosecution, the state vs. Mark Simpson. Reporters tend to put aside their normal skeptical attitude. They look for weaknesses in the defense, rather than the prosecution.

In fact, the start of the trial phase had special significance for the Wilton Times. For much of the year and a half leading up to the trial, they had watched with envy as Sally McDonald of the Wilton American successfully dominated many of the key official sources. While the Wilton Times struggled to adapt to this aggressive tabloid-style scrambling, they never really succeeded in breaking McDonald's monopoly. The trial, on the other hand, took place in just the kind of official setting in which the prestigious Wilton Times had always excelled. With his experienced court reporter Les Osborn now operating in a setting with which he was already intimately familiar, editor Charles Jackson felt that the trial offered a new opportunity for the Wilton Times to successfully compete with the Wilton American.

Because so much of this chapter focuses on the panic's progress during the trial phase, it is important to set the stage for the remainder of the Mountain Valley panic with a brief description of the three month period between the opening gavel and the jury's verdict.

The Media Frame Surrounds the Courthouse: Setting the Stage for the Trial

Until the trial began, the thirteen children slated to testify against Mark Simpson had been known to most members of the community only through the lens of media accounts. Their names had not been revealed, they had not appeared on television, and very few of their parents had made any public statements. Aside from their testimony to the state hearing leading to the revocation of the Mountain Valley Day Care Center's license, the children's

voices were simply not heard. This seemed to be largely the result of a purposeful strategy on the part of the prosecution to protect the children and guard the integrity of the case against Mark Simpson.

One result of this relative invisibility was that — for over one and a half years — the children and their allegations were almost completely the construction of claims-makers, each promoting their own self-interested view of the case. In fact, the children's primary constructed identity in news accounts was not as individuals, but as a frequently changing number of alleged victims. The following typical headlines, in sequence, are illustrative of how the children were depicted in the pre-trial phase:

Kid Sex Victims May Total 20
Wilton American
by Sally McDonald

4 Children in Abuse Case Won't Testify
Wilton Times
by Barry Suffolk

Six Day Care Tots Out as Witnesses
Mountain Valley Courier
by James Redman

With the start of the trial, this would change significantly: While arrangements would be made to shield their identity during testimony, the children's voices and words would now be heard for the first time. Emerging from the shadows of social construction, they would face Mark Simpson and directly accuse him of child sexual abuse. The much anticipated emergence of the children after so many months of anonymity heightened the drama on the

eve of the trial and reinforced the notion that something new was going to happen.

Virtually every newspaper, television station, and radio station in the region sent a reporter to the trial's opening. While not all of these would not remain for the entire two and half months, a number would remain with the trial until its conclusion. This includes several reporters who have been not frequently mentioned in the previous chapters on the panic's impact and inventory stages: Two television reporters who would play key roles in the subsequent coverage, Howard Reardon of WDEF-TV and Joseph Dyson of WGHI-TV, brought camera crews to the courthouse and would return frequently during the trial. Two radio reporters from competing radio stations, Annette Marshall of WMNO-Radio and Carol Jones of WPQR-Radio, began filing as many as five different updates each day on the trial. Paul Paley, a Wilton Times general assignment reporter, would file several controversial feature stories questioning the strength of the prosecution's case. And most notably, the Wilton Times court reporter Les Osborn would now be at the center of a series of disputes about the case's coverage.

Given the central role Les Osborn will play in the account of the panic's reaction stage, it is important in this brief scene-setting to introduce him. Osborn was the closest thing to a "dean" among the group of reporters covering the Mountain Valley Day Care Center case. A reporter for over twenty years, he had been assigned for several years to the McKinley County

Courthouse. As the only one of the reporters with a permanent base in the building where the trial was held, his cramped office became a natural gathering point for his colleagues. Osborn seemed to relish his advantage as a permanent "resident" of the courthouse, and was happy to play the role of a mentor for some of his younger colleagues who were unfamiliar with the McKinley County criminal justice system.

Despite his protestations of open-mindedness about the case, Osborn came to believe that the Simpsons had committed serious acts of child sexual abuse. While he denies that these feelings had an impact on his reporting, he feels especially strongly about Mark Simpson's guilt:

Long before the jury, I was persuaded that Mark Simpson was guilty. I was willing to listen to the contrary evidence. But it never covered the salient times and the salient people....No, Mark Simpson is well stashed away for thirty to forty years. He's got a wake up call in twenty years, because that's when he's eligible for parole. For example, I'm not sure he raped any of the children with his penis. I do feel that something was inserted in them and that were made to strike poses.

Alone among the reporters, Osborn attended virtually every session and heard the testimony of every child witness. His involvement in several disputes involving his editors, his Wilton Times colleague Paul Paley, and the Simpsons will be described later in this account.

The trial began nineteen months after the parents first heard about the allegations. Both District Attorney William Hartnett and defense attorney Thomas Marshfield made lengthy opening statements in a crowded McKinley County Courthouse. Hartnett, who to this point had quietly built his case

outside the frame of media scrutiny, emerged from the shadows and spoke of raped and photographed children who "were told that they might be taken away and would never see their mommy again or that their mommy would be killed." Marshfield told the jury that "from no one will we hear that at any time, anyone was abused in any way, shape or form."

The focal point of the trial was the testimony of the child witnesses. While thirteen children were mentioned in Prosecutor Hartnett's opening statement, only nine eventually testified. Seeking to reduce what he called the "intimidating environment" of the courtroom, Judge Martin Solway ordered the courtroom cleared and asked that a small table be set up near the witness box at which the child could sit with a parent or guardian. The press and other interested spectators listened to the testimony on a speaker in a small, separate room. The children described acts including oral and anal sex, nude photography, and the killing of animals to scare them into silence.

After expert testimony that one child would be excessively traumatized by testifying in court, his testimony was videotaped and shown to the jury at a later date. The prosecution also called several parents to the stand, who testified that their children had wet their beds, cried frequently, engaged in sexualized behavior, and complained of stomach aches. A controversial expert witness testified that these symptoms each indicated the likelihood of molestation.

The defense attempted to demonstrate that leading and suggestive

questioning of the children had taken place. Defense attorney Thomas Marshfield also called a number of present and former teachers at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center, who testified that they had not seen any abuse take place. Finally, defendant Mark Simpson took the stand in his own defense, and denied all the allegations. After twelve days of deliberations, the jury found him guilty on all remaining counts. Several months later, he received a thirty to forty year sentence, with parole possible after twenty years.

Given this study's reliance on the constructionist perspective, the details of the case are less important than work of deviance definition done by the reporters during the trial. How, in other words, did their news accounts further advance the atmosphere of moral panic? This account now examines a new factor -- intense emotions experienced by the newswriters -- that emerged to play a key role in shaping the news accounts during the trial. Simmering below the surface since the moment the allegations were first announced, these emotions became a key factor affecting the Mountain Valley coverage. Indeed, much of the remaining account will focus on the impact of emotions, described in such rich detail by the newswriters, on the organization of their work and on the resulting news accounts.

"No One Ever Asks Us How We Feel"
The Role of Emotions in the Panic's Reaction Stage

Emotions as a variable affecting newswriting emerged unexpectedly, when each reporter was asked what at first seemed like a less important question:

What did it feel like to live and work during such a period? Initially, this question was intended only to "break the ice" before addressing the more central questions of bureaucratic organization. Yet, as the interviews proceeded, it became clear that the intense emotions they experienced were -- especially during the panic's reaction stage -- a key variable explaining the construction of the panic's news accounts. Each of the respondents told personal, sometimes painful, stories about how they had struggled to avoid being overcome by their own feelings of pain and revulsion about child sexual abuse.

This unexpected finding led the inquiry into relatively uncharted waters. Most work in the sociology of news and journalism has focused on the bureaucratic organization of newsgathering, and has not examined newswriters as feeling, emotional beings. Indeed, this study began with the conventional sociological assumption that feelings are idiosyncratic and most appropriately the province of psychological inquiry. Yet repeatedly during the interviews, the newswriters moved beyond the bureaucratic considerations guiding their work into the realm of emotions. In fact, at times they would virtually plead that the study address how they *felt* about working in such an emotionally turbulent time. As Howard Reardon of WDEF-TV said: "No one ever asks how we feel when we do stories." The Mountain Valley case, Reardon and several of the others suggested, was unlike anything they had faced in their careers, and a number of the respondents remained haunted by

images of crying children on the witness stand, shouting matches in courthouse hallways, threats of violence and death, and fights they had about the case with their own colleagues. Eventually, several of the reporters revealed that their own personal relationships had been severely tested during the period they covered the Mountain Valley case.

Clearly, the reporters were not immune from the emotions being expressed by everyone else in the community. While their unique professional role required them to maintain at least an appearance of objectivity and emotional distance, they faced the same challenge as everyone else in a community seized by moral panic: Confronting a relatively "new" and threatening form of deviance, they needed to understand the threat, cope with their own emotions of anger and revulsion, and take some appropriate action. And while they tried to confront the threat while simultaneously maintaining their objectivity, these empathic emotions -- felt most intensely when they heard the children testify -- often influenced the construction of news accounts and led the newswriters to conclude that the children were telling the truth about the Simpsons. The emotions surrounding the Mountain Valley case, in other words, were more than private and idiosyncratic war stories: By influencing the opinions of the newswriters and affecting their news accounts, emotions helped advance the panic.

This intrusion of emotions did not happen without a struggle. Few qualities are valued as highly among newswriters as objectivity and emotional distance.

While feature writers and proponents of the so-called "new journalism" consciously stray from this ideal (Wolfe 1968), most daily reporters studiously seek to avoid the intrusion of subjectivity in their news stories. Further, as Tuchman (1972) pointed out, reporters often resort to special objectivity rituals to shield themselves from claims of bias and create the impression that they are being fair. These include such practices as printing both sides of an issue and the scrupulous use of quotation marks. Social theorists might view objectivity as a problematic and ultimately elusive concept, but this has not dislodged it from its role as perhaps the cornerstone of journalistic ideology (Schudson 1978).

Confronting emotions that they feared would taint their news product, the reporters and editors covering the Mountain Valley case improvised a variety of strategies to distance themselves from turmoil that was engulfing the community. Stories were reviewed by editors and stripped of emotional content. On one occasion that will be described in more detail, a story deemed excessively emotional was pulled by an editor. Reporters also employed what will be called the language of "hyper-objectivity" -- in which a special effort was made to use words devoid of emotional content -- to assure that only the most basic facts found their way into stories. And on one occasion, when the pain one reporter felt while watching the children's testimony was simply too great, he left the courtroom and waited until he could brace himself for more.

Yet these avoidance strategies designed to guarantee objectivity did not

always succeed. Sometimes the newsworker's pain and revulsion about the alleged abuse would clearly find its way into a story. In other cases, the attempts at "hyper-objectivity" led unexpectedly to a form of subjectivity in which the absence of interpretive details seemed to accord even more legitimacy to the state's version of events. In other words, the newsworkers did not win the battle to keep these emotions at bay. Indeed, when combined with more impersonal bureaucratic considerations, emotions played an important role in actually shaping the resulting news accounts of the panic's reaction stage.

What was so special about the trial? Why did emotions seem only to emerge among the newsworkers so late in the panic? Some of the explanation lies in the evolution of the newsworker's role that occurred when the trial began. As explained earlier, the pre-trial stage was marked by intense scrambling for competitive advantage. Virtually any line of investigation that could be uncovered, even if not fully confirmed, were seen as appropriate news content. The trial, as Carol Jones of WPQR-Radio said, "...came as a big relief. That's when a lot of rules took over, rules about what we can and can't do." Reporters could now be much less concerned about missing some detail, and could focus like the rest of the community on the evidence and testimony. Yet this also meant that the trial was the first opportunity for the newsworkers to come face to face with the children and listen to their testimony. Further, on a daily basis, the newsworkers had to sit in a highly-

charged courtroom among vociferous parties people on both sides of the dispute angered by specific news stories. Clearly, the McKinley County Courthouse was an emotional incubator that would challenge the abilities of the newswriters to maintain any semblance of emotional distance.

Emotions and Newswriting:
Relevant Findings from the Sociology of Emotions

All of this led to an exploration of the emerging sociology of emotions, a body of work that has yet to be applied to analyses of newswriting. This promising avenue of inquiry suggests that the behavior of actors in bureaucratic organizations cannot be explained solely by institutional and economic considerations. While such considerations are certainly central to any sociological analysis, it is clear that less rational, affective motivations also influence behavior in organizations. This realization has led sociologists to give increasing attention to the influence of emotions and emotional attachments on human behavior (Etzioni 1988). A review of this literature included the following definition of emotions:

Emotions involve: (a) appraisals of situational stimulus or context, (b) changes in physiological or bodily sensations, (c) the free or inhibited display of expressive gestures, and (d) a cultural label applied to specific constellations of one or more of the first three components.

Not surprisingly, the sociological take on emotions focuses on the extent to which they are socially acquired and socially constructed. Some tend to see emotions as relatively rigid and patterned responses to social stimuli (Kemper 1978; Scheff 1979), while others – symbolic interactionists in particular –

view emotions as constantly changing products of differing social situations (Hochschild 1979, 1983; Shott 1979).

One particular strain in this literature, primarily emerging from the symbolic interaction perspective, will be especially relevant to the remaining analysis of the panic's reaction stage. Hochschild (1979) has described the socially acquired norms that regulate emotional expression. "Feeling rules" refer to beliefs about the private feelings that are appropriate in given situations. "Display rules" are the norms that regulate actual emotional behavior. Hochschild, in studies of service-workers who are expected to produce emotions, has examined the effects of these normative influences on individual feelings and behaviors.

Much of the remaining account of the panic's reaction stage will focus on exactly what made the case such an atypically emotional experience for the newswriters, what kind of "feeling rules" and "display rules" guided their work covering the Mountain Valley trial, how successful the newswriters were in following these rules, and how all this "emotional labor" actually affected the process of news production in the panic's reaction stage. This analysis is intended to suggest that any account of newswork in a moral panic - - if it is to provide a full accounting of the dynamics of these episodes -- must consider the role of emotions as a tool of social construction along with more bureaucratic and structural considerations.

"They Had Ideas About the World That Were Shattered:"
How and Why and How the Mountain Valley Case Was Unusually Emotional

Each newsworker's lived experience during the events in Mountain Valley had a unique quality. Sally McDonald of the Wilton American, who was perceived by some as pro-prosecution, lived with the constant enmity of the Simpson's supporters. James Redman of the Mountain Valley Courier was perceived as pro-defense, and was scorned by his media colleagues for perceived bias. Yet each of the respondents also told remarkably similar stories about shared experiences covering the events in Mountain Valley. This rough paraphrase captures the essence of this story:

You just can't imagine what it was like. I have covered the most horrible, heinous crimes. I have seen dead bodies and watched family members hear about the death of loved ones. Yet nothing I have ever experienced prepared me for how I felt when I heard about the charges and heard the children testify. It was almost impossible for me to imagine that anyone could do such horrible things to children. And I've never felt so much personal pain while covering a story. It was a real struggle as I tried, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to keep my feelings out of my stories.

It is interesting to note that each respondent began by telling explicit war stories about previous stories they had covered. Whether describing plane crashes, mass asphyxiations, or even beheadings, no interview was complete without some recounting of particularly gruesome or tragic stories that they had previously covered. Clearly, in recounting these painful experiences, they were implying that the normal display rule governing emotions is that even the most troubling stories should be covered with a minimum of emotional involvement.

One specific war story was shared by several newswriters. In the year prior to the events in Mountain Valley, a particularly gruesome accident had occurred on a lake near Wilton. Speeding across the lake in his motorized boat, an intoxicated boater had lost control and decapitated a woman swimmer. Howard Reardon of WDEF-TV and several other reporters had been present for the trial, and watched as the victim's granddaughter testified about the incident.

Reardon described the scene in the courtroom, and told how a group of reporters had cried as the girl testified. While open about his emotions, he told of how he had been able to avoid crying:

People don't realize that we have trouble with emotions. I had an interesting experience in a courtroom when I covered the sentencing of a drunken boater. Five of us sat listening to the victim's statements and three of us were crying and I have never seen reporters cry like that. I was moved. I didn't cry. You had this fourteen year old girl crying on the stand talking about her grandmother's body lying on the dock with a bloody towel where her head should have been. I lost my grandmother recently and she was very dear to me.

Steve Baylor of the Wilton American also made a point of recalling other cases involving children that he had been able to weather. Baylor seemed to be suggesting that -- while he was not cold and unfeeling -- normally these feelings had not interfered with his work.

I once covered a kid with enlargement of the heart. An honor student in Bettstown. This was when heart transplants were getting going. The Wilton American was into "rent-a-heart" business. We had done the same thing with kidneys and were moving through the various body parts at the time. This kid was a motorcycle champion, the whole bit. He died. The father was devastated. It still sticks with me. I can remember it to this day.

I once did four kids in Richardsville who asphyxiated themselves sitting in the driveway one night. It's cold one night, so the kids put on the engine. Four kids are dead in the morning when Mom looks out the window. I remember the funerals. Awful, absolutely awful.

The normal display rule was that obvious emotional expressions, while occasionally unavoidable, are unacceptable. Howard Reardon of WDEF-TV stated the rule quite succinctly: "In every two-sided matter you have to work hard to hide your own feelings if you have them. Appear to be neutral or be neutral."

Yet, after making clear that they understood the normal display rules, each respondent explained in some detail how Mountain Valley had been a special case. No previous experience, they suggested, had prepared them for the emotions they felt as they covered the case. And despite trying a variety of strategies for management of these emotions, frequently they found that their work was being affected and that emotions were a factor in how stories were shaped. Why was the Mountain Valley case different?

Children, Sex, and Victimization:
The Newswriters Confront A Volatile and Emotional Formula

The first area of unique emotionality described by the respondents was the combination of the nature of the allegations and the fact that the alleged victims were children. The newswriters were not new to the idea of violent crimes against children. Indeed, in the year before the events in Mountain Valley, each of the reporters had covered the particularly gruesome murder of a young girl. The child's murder, which had been covered extensively in the

Wilton press, had been particularly disturbing and sensitized the newswriters to the issue of child abuse. Steve Baylor of the Wilton American, in particular, vividly recalls his feelings covering this earlier case.

The single part of the job I had the most trouble with was child victims. Our formula at the Wilton American had always been tits, tots, and terror. The Mountain Valley case had all three. The child stories had the worst personal effect on me. I had kids at the time. Young ones. This didn't bother me as much as the Juliette Puffin case. Child beating was the previous cause of the month.

Annette Marshall of WMNO-Radio also remembers that the Juliette Puffin murder had made an unusual impression on the newswriters and placed them "on guard."

There was another case, the Juliette Puffin case, that put us all on guard. I didn't cover that one, though, because I was covering another case involving police brutality on a massive scale at B.D. Sullivan's, a local pub. Those were going on one floor apart in the same court house.

Yet this prior sensitization to crimes against children did not fully prepare the newswriters for Mountain Valley's highly charged combination of child victims and sexual abuse. Indeed, several claimed that the allegations were so completely outside the pale of what they thought was possible that they initially dismissed the allegations. However, the reality of the charges hit home almost immediately, and the newswriters came to view child sexual abuse as a comparable to child homicide as a violation of community values.

Sally McDonald and James Redman, viewed by many in the community as representing two distinct perspectives on the case, both shared this view of child sexual abuse as the quintessential violation of social norms. For

McDonald, no crime was more serious:

Obviously, it's such an emotional topic because child sexual abuse is such a horrible crime, but being accused of it is such a horrible thing. We hear of cases where in a divorce case one spouse accuses another one of abusing sexually the child. What more horrible crime can you accuse someone of?

Redman echoed this belief, although he allowed that child homicide probably deserved a more prominent position on the hierarchy of crime seriousness: "It's the most frowned upon act in society. Short of child murder. Molesters can't go to prison without worrying about getting hit with the shiv."

It was only a short time until the newswriters quickly began not only to believe that such things were possible, but also that they had been possible at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center. In other words, the shock and revulsion they felt led not to skepticism but to a belief that the Simpsons were capable of such crimes.

The clearest example of the quick transition from intense emotions to acceptance and belief came from Les Osborn of the Wilton Times. Note how Osborn leaps from shock about the medical testimony to an assumption that the allegations must be true.

I mean, you're talking about children being humiliated. You're not talking about clinical evidence. Later on, the pediatric gynecologist gets up on the stand and describes torn hymens and reddening and trauma to rectum and vagina, you begin to think this is real, this is painful. These children were hurt. It wasn't just a doll, it wasn't just a clinical image in a manual. These are real kids that hurt. They had ideas about the world that were shattered. These memories will stay with them for a long time. Maybe not for life, but for a long time.

A special twist to this aspect of the case's emotionality was the fact that several of the newswriters were parents of young children. In fact, while they

were not routinely asked in the interviews if they had children, each quickly volunteered the information and explained how their struggle to cope was complicated by strong feelings of sympathy for the children. In this respect, the newswriters were no different from many other members of the community who had transferred their protective impulses for their own children to the alleged victims. Les Osborn provided the clearest statement of this process of transferred sympathy.

I was different from most fathers. I diapered and fed my kids. I really could identify. I would have thrown myself in front of a god damn bulldozer just to save them from a nick. My own kids were small at the time of the Mountain Valley case. My protective instincts were at trigger edge.

Even those who were not parents mentioned images of nieces, nephews, and god-children who seemed to haunt them during the trial.

This volatile emotional formula of children, victimization, and sex -- what Steve Baylor of the Wilton American referred to as "tits, tots, and terror" -- was examined recently in an essay by legal scholar John E.B. Myers, a specialist in child witness issues. The Myers essay helps explain the highly charged formula of child sexual abuse cases.

To appreciate why child sexual abuse evokes such strong emotion in adults, it is helpful to engage in a simple mental exercise. First, put any thoughts of child abuse completely out of your mind...This done, ask the following question: What do adults feel strongly about? Children come immediately to mind. Normal, healthy, non-abused children evoke strong emotions in adults.

Now put children to one side and ask the same question: What else do adults feel strongly about? Victimization. Few subjects evoke stronger feelings than victimization. Most of us are victims at some point, and the

anger and helplessness that accompany victimization are strong emotions indeed.

Finally, put children and victimization aside, and ask once more: What do adults feel strongly about? Sex! Few subjects evoke stronger or more varied emotions than sex and sexuality.

Now, put the three together -- children, victimization, and sex -- to form child sexual abuse, and the stage is set for emotional fireworks. (1994:19-20)

This formula was a fundamental reason that the Mountain Valley case was an unusual experience for the newswriters. And when what Osborn called his "protective instincts" was added to the mix, the newswriters report that they became open to the possibility that the children might be telling the truth. Indeed, after listening to the children testify, only one skeptic -- whose case will be described in some detail -- remained among the newswriters. Yet before moving to the testimony and how its coverage further promoted the panic, another explanation for the case's emotionality must be described.

The McKinley County Courthouse as Emotional Hothouse:
A Further Explanation for the Newswriters' Emotions

The other major reason for the newswriters' intensely emotional experience was the unrelenting public scrutiny to which they were subjected. The parties to the case viewed the news media as second only to the legal system as the key venue of their struggle, and subjected the stories by each reporter to constant and intense analysis. Reporters found that word choices were questioned, alleged bias was vigorously protested, and angry calls of protest were made to editors and publishers.

During the panic's reaction stage, this relentless scrutiny was especially intense. Every day during the trial, the courthouse was filled with emotional and angry parties on each side of the case. And sitting literally in the midst of the fray were the reporters covering the case. Each were well known to those in the courtroom, and were often forced to do their newswork while sitting in close proximity to people who viewed them as either despised adversaries or loyal supporters. Indeed, when the children testified, they were forced to join these observers in the small crowded room in which the testimony was heard on a small speaker.

Sally McDonald of the Wilton American reported an especially difficult time in the courtroom. Since the case had begun, the Simpson's supporters had dismissed her as hopelessly biased. Simply sitting in the courtroom was an emotionally charged experience for McDonald.

It's the most emotional case I have ever covered. Every day tension was very high. The parents were convinced that their kids had been raped. On the other side, you had the family of Mark Simpson who were convinced that he didn't do anything. There was this real tension, this real hate, this real animosity, particularly high on the Simpson side. In fact, it was mostly his wife's family. She has a very big family in Mountain Valley.

...There were a lot of them there every day. The tension was just so high. Both sides were so convinced that they were on the right side. Everything we wrote, every word we wrote was scrutinized. But when I say, in terms of emotionalism, it was this really unpleasant atmosphere constantly. By the end of the trial, there was a real hatred.

Indeed, the comments of some of the Simpson's supporters confirm that McDonald's feelings of hostility were fully justified. In particular, Bill and Susan Gordon, friends and supporters of the Simpsons, felt that McDonald had

sided with the prosecution. Further, they believed that McDonald had used her pleasant demeanor as a tool of deception.

I learned to not trust Sally McDonald. She's just so sweet looking. She's really a sweetheart. She'd lead you to believe that she was just being your friend. Like we would speak with her and later on you'd realize what was going on.

These feelings were not limited to specific newswriters. Supporters on both sides viewed Howard Reardon of WDEF-TV as fair and sympathetic, yet Reardon recalls being in the courtroom as an extraordinary test of his ability to negotiate the anger and passion coming at him from both sides. How, he worried, could he remain fair and neutral?

Some reporters were perceived by each side as being either friends or enemies. All the sides were clearly drawn, as perceived by the people there. There were a lot of sub-dramas. If you were seen laughing and joking with one side, the other side held it against you. It was very stressful. Not so much on the journalism side, but personally. To spend so much time with people that you either came to like or dislike. To juggle the families against your own heart and your own inclination to make choices as to who you like or don't like and to maintain your fairness and appear neutral was extremely difficult.

In other words, part of the stress that resulted from what might be called the "hothouse-effect" was that each casual glance or remark by a newswriter was seen by those attending the trial as evidence of some personal bias. To produce news accounts in this atmosphere proved to be an unprecedented challenge. And while this was not the first high-profile case that they had ever covered, the newswriters seemed ill-prepared for the moral panic's volatile combination of intense public interest and allegations involving child sexual abuse.

James Redman of the Mountain Valley Courier found that work in this atmosphere was especially difficult. Because of his publisher's previous relationship with defendant Mary Simpson, he was widely perceived as favoring the defense, and parents of the alleged victims subjected him to intense scrutiny. Redman describes what happened when, one day in court, after he had written a story devoting several paragraphs to the defense strategy, he found himself face to face with a father of a child about to testify.

I remember a father of one of the kids, very close to the verdict -- a very stressful time -- saying: "Oh, you better watch out. You better be careful." I had to hold my tongue, but what I almost asked was: "Wait a minute. You have a child who was supposedly molested. What could you possibly care if I give seven paragraphs to the defense or eight paragraphs to the prosecution in a particular story?"

The threats against the newswriters did not come only from the parents of the child witnesses. As the trial proceeded, Sally McDonald became even more of a lightning rod for criticism from supporters of the Simpsons, who were unable to forget her role in publicizing the child pornography allegation. This tension reached a boiling point when Judge Solway granted a defense motion to strike all references in the children's testimony to being photographed nude, effectively rejecting the prosecution's theory of a child pornography motive. This only further encouraged the anger of the Simpson supporters. It was at this point that McDonald began receiving threats:

I'm amazed that they thought that the press was the enemy. I thought my coverage was fair. I know they hated me at the end. I talked to the family and to Mark Simpson's wife and to Simpson. But, at the end, I know they were very bitter. I have a friend who worked -- very strange -- with

somebody that knew the Simpson's. She called me at home and told me: Oh, do you have some people up there who hate you. You better be careful. Somebody in Mountain Valley who didn't know she was my friend said: There's this one girl name McDonald at the Wilton American. We're going to get her. I mean, threatening. I never get threats like that. And I got a threat from these people.

For the radio reporters, this threatening atmosphere was a completely unique experience: For one of the first times in their careers, they emerged from relative anonymity to become visibly recognized personalities. Annette Marshall was well known as a voice on WMNO-Radio, but this was the first time she got to know the parties to a case.

This was different. Usually I'm not recognized and very removed. Removed from the participants as individuals. These are not people you really know. And when you do, it's usually the lawyers you know. Never the defendants and their supporters like this. I got to know them as individuals. There was more direct involvement. That's why it was more emotional. There was more of a feeling of knowing these people.

Clearly, this kind of emotional hothouse was something new for the newswriters. Challenged by the intensity of their own feelings, they struggled to maintain some distance from the emotional maelstrom in which they were working. On some days, entering the courtroom and finding a seat literally involved running a gauntlet of hostile observers, each with strong opinions of the case.

The key question for the present study is how this atmosphere actually affected news accounts and advanced the moral panic. Yet before addressing this question, it is important to understand what this struggle meant for the newswriters' lives. How did they try -- however unsuccessfully -- to maintain

some semblance of professional equilibrium while the events were swirling around them?

"I Went Home At Night Very Depressed:"
The Newsworker's Struggle to Stay Afloat

For the first time in each of their careers, the elaborate bureaucratic routines that had normally guided their work could not protect them from emotional involvement. What coping strategies did they employ?

One interesting strategy was to create a routine in which, after a full day listening to testimony and being subjected to such intense scrutiny, the newsworkers came to view each evening as the time when emotions could safely be expressed. The evening became the finish line of a day-long race to avoid violation of the unwritten "expression rule" prohibiting inappropriate emotional expression. While this strategy didn't always work, nighttime was when what Carol Jones of WPQR-Radio called the "flood" could be privately and safely released:

This case definitely was not routine. There was simply no way I could get away from it. The word I keep coming back to is "yucky." I felt dirtied by it. I'd come home at night and I couldn't get away from it. And I couldn't get away from it on weekends. I remember feeling that I always had to struggle to find something nice I could do for myself or for somebody else. It was the kind of case that made you sad. In radio, we don't have a lot of time during the day to sit and contemplate these aspects, but at night it comes back in a flood.

... I know that the case was very much involved in the ending of a relationship I was in at the time. You couldn't escape it. It was hard to focus on things other than the case. It contributed to my inability to continue in this relationship. But it was a real constant struggle to keep your mind off of it when you weren't working. And when you were, it was a constant struggle not to get sucked up inside of it and consumed by it.

The other radio reporter covering the Mountain Valley case, Jones's friend Annette Marshall of WMNO-Radio, had a similar experience. Yet her story adds a new twist: A radio reporter's obligation to file numerous stories during the day served as a virtual emotional shield:

I was too involved and wrapped up in the process of putting together a story. Writing new stories, listening to the tape, playing back the tape, going to the phone feeding the story, going back to the court room, listening to the testimony again. It wasn't until the end of the day when I would relax and think about what was going on that the impact would hit. Television can sit all day, take notes, and file one two and a half minute report at the end of the day. I have to do it hourly. I might file seven or eight different versions of the story over the day and then at the end of the day write several advances for use the next morning. Each time finding a different sound bite, a new angle. Coming up with a new way to say something.

Sally McDonald expressed similar feelings. For her, the Mountain Valley case was an experience of such magnitude that it completely overshadowed everything else in her life:

I felt weary. It was emotionally draining. And I went home at night very depressed. It didn't do great wonders for my private life. I felt so caught up in it. It just absorbed my whole life. Really worn by it. Because you feel so badly for everybody.

Other strategies involved elaborate internal debates in which the newswriters would sit in court and literally argue with themselves to stave off intrusive feelings. For James Redman, a "mantra" seemed to work:

I handled that with a mantra. And I still do if I have to go to some shit ass meeting. And I'm sitting there thinking that the pattern on the ceiling looks like a duck or something. I say to myself: Wait a minute, I'm supposed to be here telling people what's going on. Concentrate. Get it. There's always an "it" when you go someplace. You have to stay focused. That focus saves me. I try to get "it." I never remember sitting there and thinking, gee, if I write a "crying tot" instead of "child," am I being fair?

Despite a reputation for toughness among his colleagues, Les Osborn engaged in the same kind of struggle to keep his emotions at bay. The strategy he improvised was to constantly remind himself that, in publicizing the deviant acts and maintaining his professional distance, he was serving society by publicizing a serious threat.

I once asked a colleague who said: I drink a lot. Actually she then said we support each other, we follow professional standards, and try to remember that you are doing somebody some good.

I know the world is not all hunky-dory, that there are evil people. But I also try tell myself that my being court can have a salutary effect. A major drug defendant was once about to be sentenced in an empty courtroom. I happened to be sitting there. The defense lawyer, with whom I'm friendly, asked me if I would leave during the sentencing because he felt my presence would lead to a heavier sentence to show how tough a judge he is.

Note that, in adopting this response and by viewing himself as having a "salutary effect," Osborn begins to see himself as a representative of the public whose presence insures that the deviants will be punished.

The basic struggle with emotions that each newsworker faced was probably stated most clearly in the following extended excerpt from James Redman. Emotions, he suggests, might be inevitable, but they present a special problem for someone whose occupational ideology requires what Redman called a "clear and unbiased account." Further, this struggle was not without implications for the most private aspects of Redman's life.

One thing that made it tough was, as the verdict approached, my wife, then girlfriend, were going through some problems. We had a stressful parting of sorts. I remember feeling sorry for myself. It was hard to drag my ass into work. Then I had to write a clear unbiased account of a kid saying he got a scissor in his rectum.

... But I try to focus on the task at hand. The other day I was telling a friend about how emotions affect my work. About when I have to knock on the door of the widow Brown. To the uninitiated, it must sound like the absolute worst thing in the world to do. To call up and say: "Excuse me, can you stop your crying for a minute, let me in your house, let me have a picture of your late husband, interrupt your grieving for a while so you can tell me all about him, and then let me get out the door so I can hit deadline." Callous, right? But how else do you go about it? Do you stay there and miss deadline? Do you cry with them? You're not really doing them any good by crying crocodile tears.

Eventually, however, Redman and the other newswriters faced a moment of truth when — despite all the inner emotional turmoil and external threats — a news story had to be filed. During the trial, the print and television reporters were expected to file at least one story each day and the radio reporters often filed as many as seven or eight. How did these emotions, and the struggle to keep them at bay, actually affect the news accounts and influence the course of the moral panic?

"Stick With Verbs That Show You Are Not Affected:"
Emotions, "Hyper-Objectivity," and the Construction of News Accounts

The foregoing discussion of emotions and newswriting would be little more than a series of interesting anecdotes if the newswriters had successfully separated their feelings from influencing the process of newsgathering. Yet with little prompting, each of the respondents told fascinating stories of what happened when, in the midst of this emotional maelstrom, they finally sat down in front of their terminals and tried to write news stories. Emotions that had previously been part of their private struggle now emerged as a very real factor as they tried to produce news accounts that were acceptable to their

editors.

The primary dilemma reported by each newsworker was roughly the same: No accurate report on the Mountain Valley case could ignore the intense emotions surrounding the case. The McKinley County Courthouse was, after all, a virtual battlefield with angry, daily skirmishes between supporters on both sides. Yet to include such emotional content -- what might be called "soft facts" -- left the newsworker open to charges of bias and subjectivity. Whose version of these "soft-facts" would be included? Clearly, newswork in a moral panic was a special challenge. James Redman of the Mountain Valley Courier provided the clearest statement of the dilemma.

You try to put a distance, but not so much of a distance that you miss what's happening. You can stand back and be smug and sarcastic, but then you can miss the story. But then again, you could go home and have nightmares about children being abused and also miss the story. You try to find the middle ground.

One especially illustrative example of this search for a middle ground -- in which the newsworkers attempted to construct stories that balanced emotion and distance -- was an extended negotiation between Les Osborn and Charles Jackson, his editor at the Wilton Times. Their story reveals much about newswork in a moral panic and, further, vividly illustrates the factors that influence the complex process of negotiation between reporter and editor.

Les Osborn, as previously mentioned, was the only one of the reporters who was permanently based at the McKinley County Courthouse. This meant that he was the Wilton Times reporter who covered virtually every major

criminal trial taking place in McKinley County. As a fixture at the courthouse for a number of years, he knew virtually every judge and attorney and was widely regarded as one of the two or three most experienced court reporters in the city. His by-line appeared frequently in the metro section of the Wilton Times.

Yet more than a few of the respondents, including Osborn himself, hinted that the court assignment -- with its office away from the main newsroom of the Wilton Times -- was less a prize than it was a form of exile for a reporter viewed as difficult by his colleagues and editors. Osborn was very much an iconoclast, and was much more willing than his colleagues to argue with editors about the content of stories. He volunteered a number of revealing stories of such conflicts, and saw himself as a defender of high journalistic standards battling the forces of expediency and dishonesty. His most vivid memory was a conflict about the issue of race:

Editors often try to manipulate the stories to reflect their own bias. And I've been in some nasty situations with stories involving race. I covered a story of a black man who shot his white boss. The black had been fired and he came back and shot his boss dead. The black community said it was a civil rights case. I said it was a murder case. I asked to be taken off the story because some editor would take out the evidence of how brutal and uncaring the killer was and put in the fact that he felt discriminated against.

Most relevant to the present study was his stubborn belief, expressed frequently and forcefully to his editor Charles Jackson, that stories about the Mountain Valley Day Care Center had to impart to readers some sense of the intense emotions that had enveloped all the participants. The emotional

atmosphere in the courtroom, he urged, was an aspect of the case that should be prominently included in stories. On the other hand, he knew that excessive emotional content could taint a story.

His editor Charles Jackson was sympathetic to this point of view. Indeed, on several occasions, Jackson's superiors had been responsible for cutting emotional content from Osborn's Mountain Valley stories. Jackson was not happy about these editorial changes, and bemoaned the fact that, because political coverage was given the highest priority, crime stories were typically the first to be cut. He explained that, when a crime story was cut, the first part of the story to go was any descriptions of ambience that strayed from the case's basic details.

When there was a good political story at the time, our court stories were cut first the color, then the quotes, then the bone. Osborn was not exaggerating when he says that a lot of the color and descriptive detail were cut in favor of testimony, questioning, and direct responses. That's not good. A lot of the reaction of the jury, expressions on the face of the judge can all reveal a lot. How someone answers the questions.

... We should be doing more. We have more space than the tabs. We can display more than the Wilton American. Color gives a story like that its juice. I mean, why not? We demand color like this in many other stories. Why not in our court stories?

Yet, for the most part, Jackson let Osborn know that -- while some descriptive language was appropriate -- he shared the conventional journalistic belief that court coverage should normally focus on little more than the basic facts of a case. His explanation is yet additional evidence of the extent to which, especially during a trial, the power and legitimacy of the state sets the

agenda for so much of the newsgathering process.

One of the problems with court stories is that there are very serious implications of describing a witness as nervous and fidgety. It's different than a political candidate. How you describe a court scene, since it's life and death in some cases, it carries more weight. So we try to stay very close to the testimony. As a result, the whole building here in court cases tends to say just the facts please. Although you can add to a story by talking about a prosecutor's measured tones or a judge who is exasperated by long-winded answers.

Jackson argues that the gravity of these official proceedings, and the need not to "cost someone their freedom," demands that reporters step back from their normal interpretive stance and focus largely on evidence and testimony. He grants that raising questions might be appropriate in political stories, but counters that the "higher stakes" of trial coverage demands an absence of subjectivity. On the other hand, he did sympathize with Osborn's desire to cover the case in all its rich detail.

This difference of opinion between Osborn and his editor continued to erupt, yet -- for the most part -- the two were able to successfully negotiate stories that included both basic details and descriptions of the tense courtroom atmosphere. However, about midway through the trial, for reasons that remain a matter of dispute, several stories filed by Osborn were killed. Osborn suspected that it might have resulted from the "atmosphere" he liked to include in stories. It is also possible that, after a string of so many similar stories about child witnesses, the Wilton Times felt that it was unnecessary to print a story each day. Editor Jackson admits only that "Osborn was not exaggerating when he says that a lot of the color and descriptive detail were cut in favor of

testimony, questioning, and direct responses." Yet, whatever the real reason, the following excerpts from three killed stories do reveal some of the clinical detail and descriptions of ambience that concerned his editor.

1. An eight year old boy, sometimes sounding near tears, yesterday described how he was abused while a pupil at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center and how animals were killed in front of him to impress him with the need to keep quiet.

2. In testimony yesterday before a McKinley County jury, the boy told District Attorney Thomas Marshfield that Mark Simpson had touched his genitalia and penetrated him digitally. The child also testified, seemingly reluctantly, that he had been made to commit oral sex on Simpson. . The first three times Hartnett questioned the child whether Simpson had made him do anything other than touch with his hands, the boy replied, "I forget that one."

3. In testimony yesterday, the four-year old said Simpson had "stuck a knife in my bum." ...The girl also testified that Simpson had threatened "he would come and cut me to pieces," and would do the same thing to her parents.

So how did Osborn respond when he was admonished to be less subjective and less explicit? How did he try to negotiate this gulf in a way that met his editor's expectations? His response reveals much about how emotions affect newswork. Confronted by his own emotions about the case, and by his editor's demands that he change his stories, Osborn improvised the strategy of "hyper-objectivity." Having been criticized for crossing the line into subjectivity, Osborn language became extremely cautious.

It was different from any other trial. I know that this affected my work. One important thing was that I had to be extra careful in my choice of verbs. Usually, I tried to force myself to write "said." It's colorless, but it serves it's purpose. I could say: "He shouted." But I couldn't say: "He shouted with righteous indignation." You try to stick with verbs that do not show you are affected by it, but you owe the reader a story that shows that

this is a charged atmosphere. I cannot be an automaton.

Osborn implemented this strategy of "hyper-objectivity" by simply reprinting excerpts from the trial transcript, avoiding the subjective stance that had concerned his editor.

Osborn's attempt to remain objective, as well as similar efforts during the trial made by James Redman of the Mountain Valley Courier, Steve Baylor of the Wilton American, and Annette Marshall of WMNO-Radio, seem to be yet another example of what Tuchman called objectivity as strategic ritual. Facing criticism for straying into the realm of emotions and subjectivity, they designed a strategy designed to deflect claims of bias. By omitting their own critical perspective from stories, the newswriters met the expectations of editors who, as editor Charles Jackson stated, wanted reporters to "stick with what was said and not so much with subjective description. The stakes seem to be higher."

Yet even staying "close to the testimony" does not avoid subjectivity. While the verbatim testimony is a record of what is said in court, it is not a neutral, objective record of the facts. Rather, testimony is itself a socially constructed version of reality resulting from the interactive process between attorneys and witnesses. Further, because the trial's agenda is essentially set by the prosecution, who presents the initial roster of witnesses and first questions each witness, the testimony in many criminal trials is very much embedded in the prosecution's theory of the case. Indeed, of Osborn's four

trial stories for the Wilton Times with such verbatim excerpts, three included no testimony elicited on cross-examination by the defense.

Consequently, simply reprinting transcripts of the children's testimony without critical analysis or descriptions of courtroom ambience – while satisfying Osborn's need to be perceived as objective – even further granted official institutions the dominant position as the primary definers of the case. Further, it meant that this testimony – which was the core of the case against Mark Simpson – tended to be presented without any analysis of its believability or consistency.

Because the testimony was so central to the case against Mark Simpson and to the progress of the moral panic, the study now turns to an extended discussion of how it was understood and covered by the newswriters. How did the newswriters listen to the children and interpret the evidence against Mark Simpson?

Newswork in a the Panic's Reaction Stage: The Challenge of the Children's Testimony

If the panic had its origins at the first meetings with parents, the episode's defining moment was surely the day eighteen months later when the first of nine child witnesses took the stand against Mark Simpson. The entire case now hinged on the testimony of the children.

The testimony was also the seminal moment of the Mountain Valley case for the newswriters. After filing almost daily stories for eighteen months, they would now come face to face with the children for the first time.

Whatever strategies they had been able to employ to distance themselves from the case would now be tested as they listened to nine small children speak in excruciating detail about alleged acts of child sexual abuse. Indeed, because the entire episode had ultimately come down to whether or not the children were telling the truth, and because the community was so polarized over the truth of the allegations, how the newswriters would shape and report the testimony would play a crucial role in determining whether the panic would either advance or lose its momentum.

All of this was even further complicated by the fact that none of the newswriters had ever covered a case that relied so completely on children's testimony. Many of the routines they had developed to cover adult testimony would now have to be reconsidered in light of the age of the witnesses. New questions would emerge that would lead them to examine many of their most basic assumptions about truth and objectivity: How do you listen to a child? How do you tell if a child is telling the truth? Do children ever fabricate allegations of child sexual abuse? Can zealous therapists and prosecutors implant false memories of abuse?

For newswriters who place a high professional value on knowing and understanding the world, these new questions were an unprecedented challenge. After decades in which they primarily confronted children as voiceless victims, they were suddenly face to face with the child victims. And the particular circumstances of the Mountain Valley case made matters even

more complicated: First, the testimony of these children was disputed by authoritative, believable adults. In addition to Mark Simpson, who took the stand in his own defense, other teachers from the Mountain Valley Day Care Center testified that nothing even remotely suspicious had taken place. Further, as suggested earlier in this chapter, the children were testifying about acts that were completely outside the boundaries of what even worldly reporters thought was possible. Sally McDonald, for example, admits that at first she did not even understand the meaning of the charges. Finally, other authoritative adults -- including parents, social workers, physicians, police officers, and lawyers -- were weighing in on the other side, claiming with comparable conviction that horrible things did happen. Determining truth in this legal quagmire seemed almost impossible.

Yet, despite these confounding factors, the newswriters gradually came to believe the children. Emotionally moved as they watched the children's explicit and pained testimony, and unable to accept the possibility that the children could be lying about such explicit matters, the newswriters wrote uncritical accounts that avoided any mention of the possibility that the children might not be telling the truth. The result was that, at the episode's seminal moment, the press visibly reinforced the reality of the deviant threat and helped advance the panic. How did this happen? David Shaw, a Los Angeles Times reporter, pointedly asked the same question in a Pulitzer prize-winning series about press coverage of the McMartin case: "Few journalists stopped to question the

believability of the prosecution's charges. Where was skepticism in the media" (Shaw 1990:1)?

The seeds for this absence of skepticism were planted on the first day of opening statements in Simpson's trial. Prosecutor William Hartnett, preparing the jury for the fact that the case would hinge of the children's testimony, offered a detailed theory for how children recall and subsequently speak about past, traumatic events. Quoted in Les Osborn's first trial story in the Wilton Times, Hartnett warned the jury that conventional understandings of truth and memory might not apply:

**Jury Given Testimony Preview in Mountain Valley
Day-Care Rape Case**

by Les Osborn
Wilton Times

..."They may leave things out," the prosecutor, District Attorney William Hartnett said in an opening statement in McKinley County Court. "They may repress things that are emotionally distressing. They may take three events and compress them into one. They are unable to keep events in sequence. But children of this age group have the ability to report on the central core of things that happen to them like sexual abuse.

Sally McDonald followed with a story that also left no doubt that the agenda for the trial would be the "believability" of the children's testimony. Although her story does not actually suggest that the children should be believed, the story virtually ignores the question of whether the defendant's denials can be believed. All that follows, the lead paragraph implies, will be driven by that testimony. Framing the Mountain Valley case in this way

implied that the presumption of innocence would be less important than determining the truth of the testimony.

**Child Abuse Judge to Jurors:
"Listen to the Children's Testimony"**

by Sally McDonald
Wilton American

Jurors were urged yesterday to judge the "believability" of 13 children allegedly raped and assaulted at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center in Mountain Valley by defendant Mark Simpson.

District Attorney William Hartnett said that many of the children will describe how they were threatened to remain quiet, "threats involving harm to the child or to their mommy or daddy."

"Some were told that they might be taken away and would never see their mommy again or that their mommy would be killed." Hartnett said one threat involved a dead animal and another involved castration.

Even James Redman -- perceived by some as favoring the defense -- gave more prominent play to the prosecution's statement in his Mountain Valley Courier story. While the smaller sub-heading of the story does mention the defense, the overall effect of the story's lead paragraph is to further reinforce the notion that the case's agenda will be set by the prosecution.

**DA: Children Abused in a "Secret Room"
Defense: Client Victim of a Botched Probe (smaller type)
by James Redman**

A McKinley County Prosecutor told a jury, in graphic detail, how Mark Simpson of the Mountain Valley Day Care Center sexually molested 13 young students "on diverse dates" over a three-year period.

In other words, from the first day of the trial, the coverage was shaped from the prosecution's perspective and gave prominent play to the notion that

children, although they might get the details wrong, are largely correct on the larger and more traumatic issues of sexual abuse. Given this frame, what happened to the newswriters when the children actually began to testify?

Listening to the Children's Testimony in a Small Room:
The Skirmishes With Simpson Supporters Begin

Typical of many child sexual cases, Judge Martin Solway had ordered the courtroom cleared of spectators and arranged for a table and chairs to be set up near the witness box for the child and his parents. The small table's placement was such that the defense could see the child but the child could not see the defendant. The audio portion of the testimony was transmitted to a small room in the McKinley County Courthouse where the press and spectators could listen. The first witness was a seven year-old boy who told of oral and anal sex and of being photographed by a "camera with wires."

While the newswriters had lived with the case for nearly two years, they were not prepared for the impact of the testimony and for the close quarters in which they would have to listen to it. Huddled around the small speaker listening to the child's words, surrounded in the cramped room by supporters on both sides, they struggled to separate the young boy's words from his crying and construct reasonably clear stories. The task, however, almost immediately became impossible when small skirmishes and verbal sniping broke out in the room. Supporters of Mark Simpson who had been muttering under their breath were loudly challenged by supporters of the children. Later, one of the Simpson supporters began laughing at one of the allegations made

by the child. This was too much for Les Osborn, who still regrets how his veneer of emotional restraint was finally broken:

So here are the parents who have lived with the case for more than a year. And we had a bad disadvantage in terms of the emotional effect on me and other reporters. We sat in a back room with the friends and family of the Simpson family. These people were not at their best behavior. They'd laugh at inconsistencies in a child's behavior. I got a little angry at that. Then I was challenged to step outside by a fellow that I learned later on has problems. I was picking on the village idiot. I wish I hadn't.

... Later he stood in my way in the hallway. And I knew that Mark Simpson's party, especially the women, were harassing the children's family. They would snarl at them and call them names in the bathroom. The victim's families would sit in a far corner of the courtroom. Simpson's family would sit by the door. The victim's people were made to run the gauntlet. The dufus was blocking my way. I kept right on walking and shoved him sideways. He said: "You see what I mean, the press is hostile."

Sally McDonald, who was sitting next to Osborn listening to the testimony when this incident occurred, also recalls how difficult it was to listen to the children while this turmoil was going on around her. She also lost her temper:

It was just gut wrenching, it was really horrible. And here these little kids are, breaking down, you know little babies testifying. And there's Mark Simpson's relative smirking and talking and critiquing and attacking the kids while they're talking, while they're giving their testimony.

And I said to him: Look, I'm trying to listen. Could you reserve your comments until after. I can't hear if you're talking. These people were so convinced that Mark Simpson was innocent that they couldn't even listen with an open ear to what the kids were saying. And I was sitting there trying to write it down and this guy was being very obnoxious, laughing. I mean, at one point, there was something that one of the little kids said and they started laughing. They thought this was hysterical. I just found these people so insensitive.

Both she and James Redman also remember the escalating tension that eventually led to Les Osborn's conflict with the Simpson supporter. In fact,

she intervened and attempted to calm things down.

We were waiting for the next kid, we were sitting in the room, and one of the Simpson relatives made some smart comment about something. Les Osborn of the Wilton Times just exploded. He said: "You're an ignorant little whatever." And the guy said: "Oh yeah! Well you're this." And they went back and forth. Osborn said: "You want to step outside." And I jumped up and said: Hey wait a minute. This is a little ridiculous. We're all grown-ups here. Why don't you just cool it down?

James Redman was also present during these episodes. He was critical of Osborn's behavior.

Osborn had actual run-ins with the family of the Simpsons. I remember him saying: "Oh, they're big mouths." I was embarrassed. I thought that this behavior isn't right. And he would make jokes. I mean you needed to blow off steam, but you needed to do it in the newsroom. Or you did it with Marshfield alone going down the stairwell.

These emotional skirmishes while the children testified would be little more than interesting anecdotes were it not for their impact on the resulting news accounts. In fact, the effect of the enmity from the Simpson supporters was to eliminate virtually any vestiges of their skepticism about the children's testimony. Confronted only with the intense anger of the Simpson supporters, and hearing no moderate voices urging skepticism about the allegations, all but one of the newswriters -- whose case will be described later in this account -- responded by further hardening their existing tendency to believe the children.

"It Was Gut Wrenching. Little Babies Testifying" (Sally McDonald)
The Newswriters Belief in the Children is Crystallized

From the first day that the newswriters gathered at the Mountain Valley Police Department to hear about the allegations, the case -- with its intense emotions and polarized community -- had been a unique challenge for the

newswriters. Yet now, as they listened to the testimony in a small, packed room and found themselves involved in conflicts with the Simpson supporters, the task of constructing news accounts about the children's testimony became even more difficult. Yet, in the midst of it all, all but one of them come to believe the testimony. How and why did this happen?

Several answers to this questions have already been suggested: The shock and revulsion they felt at the nature of the allegations led them to suspend their normal skepticism and accept the possibility that the Simpsons might be capable of such crimes. What Les Osborn called his "protective impulse" was also at work, with the newswriters seeming to transfer their protective feelings for children to the alleged victims. Finally, the scorn to which they were subjected by the Simpson supporters clearly made them less sympathetic to the possibility that the children might not be telling the truth. Yet what finally tipped the balance was the experience of actually listening to the children's words.

Prosecutor Hartnett's conscious strategy was to make sure that the reporters would be able to hear the testimony. The reporters wanted to actually watch the children in open court, and lawyers for the Wilton Times had sued to gain access. Hartnett resisted granting full access, believing that the children should not have to testify in a crowded courtroom, yet he supported the compromise allowing the voices to be broadcast to the small room. The reporter's skepticism, he was certain, would be no match for actually hearing

the children's trembling, fragile voices.

You want the press on your side. You don't want them excluded. At the same time you don't want to inhibit the child's testimony. We always talk about how we set up these remote audio rooms so that the press could hear everything that was going on. So that they wouldn't be excluded.

In our case, this arrangement was the one single thing that worked to win over the press. The judge would have kept them out and they couldn't have even heard the testimony. It is conceivable that they would have been shut out entirely.

This may have been one of the few facts on which both prosecutor Hartnett and defense attorney Marshfield agreed. Marshfield felt that the arrangement had given the prosecution an unfair advantage in the battle of public opinion by shielding the testimony from adequate public scrutiny. His argument, typical of many of the defense attorneys who tried high profile child sexual cases, is that the special arrangements for children's testimony were a violation of the sixth amendment right of a defendant to confront his or her accuser.

What mattered to me was that the whole idea of a trial by jury is to have people scrutinize you under circumstances where they know you're a little uncomfortable. I agree that it's not fair to a child to put them in that environment without any consideration of their age. But, don't get carried away. Ma and Pa were sitting right there in front of their faces. Rehearsed drill. Leading questions. Proximity to the jury that didn't allow for a comfortable mode in cross-examination. A judge that was incredibly solicitous. Those aren't criticisms of people doing their job, but they are more motivated by those considerations than giving the accused a fair trial.

Yet beyond its affect on the rights of the accused, the testimony arrangement also played an unexpected role in leading the newswriters to believe the children. Hearing the voices of the children without seeing their faces meant that the newswriters had to imagine the proceeding rather than

directly witness it. In fact, as the children's voices came through the speaker, several of the reporters closed their eyes and tried to create a mental picture of the child on the stand. This, though, allowed the newswriters to invest the situation with their own existing perceptions about the case. Indeed, because most of the newswriters were already leaning toward believing the children, not seeing them at this crucial juncture made it even more likely that the children were more fully imagined as truthful. If the children happened to squirm while testifying or look befuddled, the reporter was not able to incorporate these facts in his or her imagined picture of the witness.

Radio reporter Annette Marshall best described this process of imagining the testimony. Note how, as she listened to the child's voice, she constructed a vision of a vulnerable child at witness table surrounded by hostile and forbidding adults.

You sort of had this image. You'd sit in the court room during the rest of the testimony and sitting right there in front of the jury box was this little tiny table with these little chairs like in a dentist office's waiting room. And the anatomically correct doll. So you had this vivid vision, but when the children came to testify, they would close the courtroom. So you weren't watching, but you could create this image in your mind. You knew where the table was and you knew where they were sitting. So you were sitting in this absolutely quiet, silent room listening to this little tiny voice come out of this tiny box. Talking about unspeakable things. There was a complete air of unreality.

... You were kind of conjuring up this mental picture. One of the children started to cry and it was heart wrenching to envision this 6-7 year old sitting in this big court room with all these people staring at him and with the defendant looking at them just a few feet away. And having to go through this process of talking about the things they were having to talk about. It was depressing.

James Redman made a related point when he suggested that broadcast of the testimony to the separate room created an unexpected air of authenticity.

It was tough. The non-sequiturs, the dead air, made it more real. It was constant tension. When the door to the courtroom closed, it closed loudly. And in the room where we were listening, no one looked at anyone else. You looked down at the floor so you could hear better.

The belief in the children was further crystallized as they listened to the testimony. How, they began to wonder, could children possibly make up such explicit and detailed allegations? Rejecting the idea that an adult may have coached the child, the reporters saw the sheer volume and detail of the allegations as inherent proof that they were true. No proof beyond the child's detailed statement was required. Les Osborn stated this point of view succinctly:

When you hear a small child testify about explicit things like a knife in or near the rectum, that's credible. Kids don't have enough imagination to makes things like this up. She also talked about some kind of stick or magic wand. When children cite these details, while confused, you know something is going on.

Annette Marshall of WMNO-Radio makes the same point:

I remember at first being very skeptical about the children and wondering how this could be true. The more I listened to it, though, the more I wondered how any child could have made up such explicit details. Eventually I came to believe most of what they had to say.

Finally, the newswriters suggested that their belief in the children was ultimately a function of their innate sense of truth. How did they know that the children were telling the truth? They just knew. Steve Baylor of the Wilton American referred to this innate sense as his "bull-shit meter."

There are less falsehoods out of the mouths of children than the mouths of adults. The longer they've been on the planet, the more tendency there is to lie. I thought that when I was at the Wilton American, I had a finely tuned bullshit meter. There were people there who had made millions at bullshit. Wilton is not only a great media market, but a great bullshit market. They majored in it. It was in the water. When I hear the truth, it rings like a bell. Experienced trial lawyers say that they know the truth. I hear more bells from children as a rule than I do when adults testify.

For each of the reasons cited thus far, by the day that the jury began deliberations, most of the newswriters had come to believe that the children were telling the truth. With few exceptions, their news accounts ignored the possibility that the children might have either been coached or might not have been telling the truth. This led to the culmination of the panic's reaction stage, in which the sequestered jury deliberated the fate of Mark Simpson for close to two weeks.

"The Hatred and the Animosity Was Palpable:" (Howard Reardon)
The Announcement of the Verdict

Ten weeks after the start of the trial, after both attorneys had delivered their closing statements, Judge Martin Solway charged the jury to remember that they were "the sole judges" of the children's credibility. Urging that their decision be "one of the mind and not of the heart," he ordered them sequestered until they could reach a verdict. For twelve days -- a McKinley County record -- the twelve person jury deliberated while reporters, parties to the case, and supporters on both sides waited anxiously at the McKinley County Courthouse. Howard Reardon of WDEF-TV was assigned to remain at the courthouse during the deliberations, and he recalls the excruciatingly tense

atmosphere:

You had two extremely polarized groups attending the trial every day. Generally women who had their dearest possessions traumatized in unspeakable ways. Or certainly those were the allegations. And you had a very loyal bunch of friends and supporters of the defendants. The disdain and the hatred and the animosity was palpable. As the jury deliberations went on, when you cover a deliberation there's very little to do for anxious people. We were all in the same place, the same benches.

Finally, after receiving a note from the foreman that a verdict had been reached, the Judge called the parties back to the courtroom and asked the jury to return. Because of threats against Mark Simpson, Judge Solway had stationed a wall of state police between Simpson and the spectators. The reporters were poised to run to a telephone the moment the verdict was announced.

Each respondent vividly recalls the atmosphere as the foreman rose to announce the jury's decision. Sally McDonald, who by this point was viewed by the Simpson supporters as their enemy, was afraid that she would be attacked if a guilty verdict was announced. Because her life had already been threatened, this was the most difficult moment of her young career.

The tension in that courtroom was like nothing I have ever experienced. There was just so much hate and bitterness all around. I really thought they were going to come to blows at the end. When the verdict came in, they had to have extras security there to make sure there wasn't an attack or a riot in the courtroom. And I remember being afraid that I was going to get wacked in the face on the way out. There was so much hostility.

Finally, after Judge Solway had admonished all the parties to avoid excessive displays of emotion, the foreman began to read the verdict. Mark Simpson was found guilty on all remaining the counts of rape and sexual assault.

Despite Judge Solway's admonition, the courtroom erupted in screams and wails. A supporter of the Simpsons, referring to the children, began to shout: "They're liars, they're liars." As the state police attempted to restore order, each of the newswriters forced their way through the hostile crowd to find the nearest telephone. Les Osborn remembers watching Mark Simpson's father-in-law:

During the verdict when the women began to scream, Judge Solway had state troopers come in. There was muscle all over the place. To the credit of the defendant's side, Mark Simpson's father-in-law Jim Riley immediately ushered his family out and admonished them to be dignified.

For James Redman of the Mountain Valley Courier, the verdict was an especially difficult moment. Watching him from across the courtroom, several observers noted that Redman seemed to go white with shock. Susan Gordon, a friend of Mark Simpson, describes what she saw:

I can remember James Redman when the guilty verdict came out. I turned my head to the left and Redman is really very light skinned. I've never seen a person look like he looked. He was white as a ghost. He looked to me like he was going to pass out.

Redman confirms that he was stunned. But while Susan Gordon imagined that he reacted this way because he thought Simpson was innocent, Redman's explanation is a much more mundane illustration of newsgathering routines. At the moment the verdict was announced on Saturday morning, Redman realized that, after close to two years covering the case, he would be the only reporter who could not immediately file a story. Because the Mountain Valley Courier did not publish a Sunday edition, his story would not appear until Monday

afternoon. Redman was, however, working as a stringer for the UPI and was consoled by the fact that he could race to the phones along with his colleagues and file a story:

You know what I was thinking of? It came at the end of a long stressful process. But what I was really thinking about was that we would not be going to print until Monday. I'm going to sit there and watch Howard Reardon of WDEF-TV step in, tell the world, and I have to sit there.

If you go back and look at the Monday after the verdict, you'll see I had to write something like: Today Mark Simpson is being held in the McKinley County Courthouse awaiting sentencing after he was convicted Saturday, which all of you assholes know about already, unless you went away for the weekend.

But it helped me psychologically. I ran out of the courtroom as soon as the last count was in and was on that single phone calling in the first story on the UPI wire. That gave me a great feeling. Otherwise, I probably would have been sitting there crying. Not for the defendant, but for myself because I would have had nothing to do. I didn't even write. I went home.

Annette Marshall's memory of the moment is especially vivid because, after covering the case for so long, she was not even in court on the day the verdict was announced. Believing that the jury would not take as long as it did to reach a verdict, Marshall had taken a previously scheduled vacation and found herself listening to a colleague report the verdict on her own radio station. She was both disappointed and relieved that she wasn't there:

I was amazed when, out on vacation, I found myself wishing that the verdict would not be announced until I returned. There was a sense of disappointment, but also release, because I knew it would be a bear of a story to cover, with so many different angles, so many different people, and so much emotion.

Now each of the reporters began to construct news accounts of the verdict and its aftermath. How might this post-verdict coverage further advanced the

panic?

**"Parents: They Believed Our Kids" (Wilton American):
Verdict Coverage as the Culmination of the Panic's Reaction Stage**

After the verdict was announced, most of the strategic rituals of objectivity were almost instantly cast aside. After a lengthy period in which they were expected to maintain at least an illusion that the defendant was presumed innocent, the guilty verdict was viewed by the newswriters as the confirmation of the threat's reality.

Indeed, the extent to which the press views the court's decision as the final determination of truth is best illustrated by the speed with which the stories immediately cast aside any qualifying language like "alleged" or "possible." Mark Simpson immediately became a "child rapist" or "child molester" and the flood of news coverage in the verdict's aftermath became the culmination of the moral panic. The deviant, a visible manifestation of the community's worst fears, had been successfully identified, tried, labelled, and convicted. And as the community breathed a sigh of relief that the deviant threat had finally been eliminated, or at least temporarily subdued, the press became the terrain on which the community could collectively engage in what might be called a "labeling celebration."

Carl Mason of the Wilton American, whose tabloid would now become the most visible site of this labeling celebration, was concerned about the speed with which he and his colleagues cast aside their skepticism. In fact, he was not completely comfortable with his reliance on the court for the finding of

truth:

In fact, sometimes after a conviction, I find myself wondering if I should say that this person is in fact a felon or a child molester. The jury verdict ends it officially, but you never really know.

Yet, whatever reluctance Mason and his colleagues may have felt, the verdict paved the way for a veritable avalanche of stories proclaiming victory over the deviant threat. The community had triumphed, and the press became a key venue for the celebration.

The celebratory atmosphere is illustrated by the following headlines and lead paragraphs that appeared in the week after the verdict. It is interesting to note that the Wilton Times, which had reluctantly joined in the pre-trial feeding frenzy, now reverted to its more restrained style. On the other hand, the Wilton American, which had fueled so much of the panic with its original publication of the pornography allegation, pulled out all the stops and celebrated the community's triumph over the deviant threat:

Simpson Found Guilty On All Counts
by Les Osborn
Wilton Times

Twelve McKinley County jurors, speaking firmly, loudly, and in unison, pronounced 15 guilty verdicts against Mark Simpson yesterday, finding that he had raped and indecently assaulted nine children at his mother's day-care center.

Evidence Sealed Simpson's Fate: Jury
by Sally McDonald
Wilton American

Evidence produced against Mark Simpson left no doubt that he was guilty on all counts of molesting children at his mother's Mountain Valley Day Care Center, jurors said yesterday.

**Guilty On All Counts
Parents: They Believed Our Kids
by Sally McDonald
Wilton American**

Parents of pre-schoolers who were molested at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center cried tears of relief yesterday, rejoicing because a jury believed their children. "Justice is served," said the mother of a 5-year-old girl. "Thank god it's over. They believed our children."

**The Tragic Young:
Children Brought Stuffed Animals to Court
by Sally McDonald
Wilton American**

The courtroom changed when children became key witnesses in the Mountain Valley Day Care Center trial, and everything was carefully explained – even the judges robes.

"She is a serious kid who won't smile much.
She used to smile all the time."

**Victim Profile
by Sally McDonald
Wilton American**

A month before her fifth birthday, a little girl summoned all her courage and told a jury – as her attacker sat 10 feet away – how she was molested at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center.

...The child panicked as she approached the McKinley County Courthouse with her parents last month. She clung to her father and said: " I can't do it. I'm going to throw up. I'm so afraid of Mark. Don't make me see him. I thought I was brave, but I'm not."

Yet the celebratory post-verdict period is perhaps best illustrated by a incident involving Prosecutor William Hartnett and several of the reporters who covered the Mountain Valley case. More than any other of the respondent's recollections, this final incident vividly illustrates the extent to which skepticism about the verdict was viewed as virtual heresy in the

celebratory post-verdict period.

"He Tried to Persuade Me That I Had Been Blinded:"
Prosecutor William Hartnett Attempts to Persuade the Last Skeptical Reporter

After the verdict, a number of the reporters sought permission from the defense to interview Mark Simpson in jail. After some debate, the defense team agreed that Joseph Dyson of WGHI-TV was likely to be the most sympathetic to Simpson. While Dyson had never told the defense that he thought Simpson was innocent, he had been willing to listen to the defense and had been cordial to the Simpson family and their friends. The resulting television interview gave Mark Simpson an opportunity to visibly proclaim his innocence. Simpson came across sympathetically and, while he didn't provide any new evidence, he did seem likable and sincere. All of the respondents remember watching the interview and noting the positive image projected by Simpson.

Prosecutor William Hartnett was not amused. While the interview did not introduce any new evidence, it did give Mark Simpson a visible forum in which he could proclaim his innocence. Having just won a conviction, the interview was an exception to the virtually unanimous chorus of admiration. Hartnett didn't take any action, but remembers being annoyed:

It presented a more sympathetic view of the defendant. As the prosecutor, I don't want to say I was resentful, but I was not pleased. You want your perspective to prevail. You want people to feel that what you did was right. Anything that counteracts that in any way you react to hostilely. I was annoyed. The guy was convicted. Why are we doing this story? Are we trying to generate a backlash of concern that somehow this was an erroneous conviction?

Julie Donnelly supported the victims and their parents and shepherded them through the entire proceeding. She felt that the interview was a betrayal.

I remember feeling betrayed by Joseph Dyson. The families thought he wasn't one of the reporters who were anti-prosecution when he was covering it. Then he did the pro-defendant piece.

Charles Jackson, editor at the Wilton Times, also watched the television interview. Yet his reaction was to immediately wonder why his reporter, Les Osborn, did not even ask to interview Simpson. The next day, after several of his colleagues at the Wilton Times mentioned the television interview and the sympathetic image projected by Simpson, he called Les Osborn at the McKinley County Courthouse and asked him why he had not sought an interview with Simpson. Osborn remembers immediately being angry that his news judgement was being questioned. Mark Simpson was guilty, he felt, and nothing more need be said.

My editor called me and asked why we didn't get an interview with Mark Simpson. He told me: "Well, Simpson came across as very credible and a lot of people believe he is innocent." I laughed as I asked: "Who?" They said: "Some of the editors here." I suggested that they do their best to convince the editors not to go on record with that belief. But Dyson's TV interview persuaded the editors that he was innocent. Editors always have this dream that they'll get a story about the conviction of an innocent man.

Charles Jackson also mentioned to Osborn that Paul Paley, another reporter for the Wilton Times, had become convinced that Simpson was innocent. Osborn scoffed at Paley's opinion, noting that Paley had not even covered most of the trial. How, Osborn wondered, could Paley have concluded Simpson was innocent if he had not even heard the testimony? Osborn told Jackson that if

Paley thought Simpson was innocent, Paley should interview Simpson.

This is precisely what happened. After finishing with Osborn, Jackson called Paley and told him that, while the newspaper could not devote extensive resources to the effort, he could contact the Simpson family and file several stories. Paley describes what happened when, having accepted the Jackson's assignment, he made contact with the friends, family, and supporters of the Simpsons.

Joseph Dyson of WGHl-TV got into see Mark Simpson at the jail. That whetted the appetites of the editors at the Wilton Times. That was why they got motivated to let me do the story. I tried to take a broader look at the case than Dyson had done. I talked to Simpson's friends and neighbors and father-in-law. Everyone assembled in the dining room.

At the time, I decided not to rely on my own newspaper's account. It was skewed. I still remembered the Wilton Times's inflammatory coverage of an insurance fraud case by a reporter who really should have been an FBI agent. He always leaned over backwards to make the cops and the prosecution look good.

After Paley finished his interviews, and as he began to write his story, he realized that -- without an extended examination of the entire trial record -- he really could not produce a story that persuasively raised doubts about Simpson's innocence. All that he had done was meet with the Simpson supporters, observe Simpson in court, and decide that Simpson did not fit the profile of a typical child abuser. Consequently, he decided on a story that would be less a defense of Simpson than a description of the impact of the case on the lives of his family and his supporters. Indeed, Paley's story -- excerpts of which are included here -- is one of the first during the entire

Mountain Valley case that considered the traumatic impact on the defense.

**Anguish for Simpson's Family, Too.
Friends, Relatives, Bring Food,
Money, Support to Wife, Children
by Paul Paley
Wilton Times**

In the past two weeks, dozen's of friends and relatives have called to offer her support. Many have dropped by her home at 12 Beach Street in Mountain Valley with food, diapers for her 22 month-old son and money, nearly \$5000 by the family's estimate, for her husband's trial expenses and his appeal.

..."Parents still let their kids come down here, even though Simpson's an alleged rapist," said Sally Simpson's father, Jim Riley, gesturing at the half-dozen youngsters frolicking in the yard beside his daughter's modest blue house.

..."Mark did a lot of explaining before the trial," Sally Simpson said. "He told them, 'Kids have said things about daddy and the jury would decide.' We came home Saturday and told them the jury decided to believe the kids and not daddy. Tears flowed when she said her son "calls dada every day" from his crib. She interrupted the discussion to take a call from Rev. Steven Michaels of the Mountain Valley Presbyterian Church, a long-time supporter who had just visited Simpson.

This story ignited yet another controversy: Ignoring the fact that Paley had not actually written that Simpson was innocent, his journalistic colleagues unanimously subjected the story to scorn and derision. Why, they wanted to know, did Paley do a sympathetic story about the family of a guilty child molester? By opting out of the "labeling celebration," Paley became a thorn in the side of those who could tolerate nothing less than complete consensus. Paley's colleague Les Osborn felt strongly that Simpson was guilty and strongly criticized Paley's story:

I was so persuaded that Simpson was guilty of the charges and a hell of a lot more. So I suggested to the editors that if Paul Paley believed Simpson, let him get an interview. Paley's story didn't uncover new evidence. There was nothing to uncover. I asked the prosecutor if he saw the story. I told him: "I want you to know I was asked to do an interview with Simpson because some of my editors thought he came across as innocent." Hartnett the prosecutor said: "Let those people sit down with us and let us show them the evidence that I couldn't present in court." Long before the jury, I was persuaded that Simpson was guilty.

Charles Jackson, the editor who had been mediating the dispute between Osborn and Paley, thought the story was well written and appropriately sympathetic. However, while it may have only been what he called a "two victims to every tragedy" story, Jackson knew that even minimal sympathy for the family of the accused would be widely viewed as misplaced and even heretical.

It's usually very common to do a story about how both the victims and the perpetrators families are suffering. Because the victims were children there was virtually no sympathy for the family of the alleged perpetrator. He might as well have been an islamic cleric held by the Israelis. No one even wanted the "there are two victims to every tragedy" kind of story. People complained to us that there was no place for sympathetic stories.

Sally McDonald stated her criticism of Paley in a slightly different way. She felt that, because Paley had not covered the whole trial, he had no basis on which to conclude that Simpson was innocent.

Paul Paley didn't cover the trial. How could someone who wasn't there make a determination that he's innocent? Based on what? He's basing it on what one side is telling him. I don't think Paul is overly bright. I don't have that much respect for someone who has an opinion on something that they haven't....If he sat there every day like I did and listened to all the evidence and at the end said to me this guy is innocent. Then I would have respect for that.

Paley knew that the story would make him a pariah. And, while he didn't want

to be known as what he called the "house heretic," he did believe that Simpson was innocent and felt that the story might at least raise some reasonable doubt.

The Wilton American probably wouldn't have done it. Tabloids follow the public passions pretty closely. We strive not to, although we fall into the same trap. I've been able to take a dissenting view. Although, I'm not the house heretic. I still feel that I should have gone further in that story. I didn't have the time or the material to go much further.

... It's an example of how you have to be on your guard all the time. On your guard against the prevailing opinion. How you can't get sucked into, you can't parrot, what most people are saying. How you must maintain your independence from even the prevailing view in your own organization. You don't have to go out, turn cartwheels, and embarrass your organization. You'll get fired for that.

All of this led to one of the most revealing incidents in the entire Mountain Valley episode. Prosecutor Hartnett, concerned about the sympathetic story, summoned Paley to his office and -- depending on whose account one accepts -- either angrily berated him for his story or gently tried to convince him that Simpson was guilty. Both parties agree that Hartnett showed Paley a number of examples of explicit child pornography, none of which had anything to do with the Mountain Valley case.

Paley was shocked. Hartnett had just won the case of his career and public opinion had widely supported his prosecution of Simpson. Most post-verdict coverage had hailed Hartnett as the hero who had triumphed over the threat. Only Paley was voicing an alternative view, yet Hartnett seemed unable to accept that anyone would express sympathy for Simpson's family. Paley describes the scene in Hartnett's office:

Hartnett called me in and had me to his office. He tried to persuade me that I had been blinded by his family and friends and that my story was naive, was wrong. But his arguments were bizarre and were characteristic of the kind of hysteria that was in effect. He showed me child pornography pictures having nothing to do with the case. He showed me autopsy photos, gruesome photos. There were the usual objects thrust in vaginas and rectums.

Paley remembers being stunned as Hartnett brought out each photograph.

Why, he thought to himself, is it so important to Hartnett that I become a convert to the cause? And why is he showing me photographs that have nothing to do with the Mountain Valley case?

I asked him: "What does this have to do with the Simpson case? He said: "Well, this is an example of what people can do." I told him that I knew people could behave in heinous ways and that were a lot of pederasts in this world. And that the country was now mobilized against them. But he spent an hour and a half rubbing my nose in these irrelevant, gruesome photos. Saying this is what we are up against. This is how diabolical molesters can be. I asked him about McMartin and Jordan, but to no avail. As if his whole career depended on the conviction being upheld. Which sadly it was a year or two later. I was floored at how this gifted prosecutor could have been so blinded.

Hartnett doesn't deny that he called Paley to his office and showed him explicit child pornography. Neither does he see any impropriety in calling in a reporter after a critical story.

Whenever I encountered doubters, people who couldn't believe children's stories about pencils, sticks, thermometers, I would show them. Seeing it graphically does something to people in terms of their believing it. I may have said: "Listen, Paul, what these kids are talking about is what happened here. And what they were describing is what happens in general."

I thought it might have the same impact on him that it had on me. I remember when I first heard it from the kids. I tried to rationalize it. Make it into something that makes sense. Maybe this stick was something other than a stick. Or maybe the pen wasn't really a pen.

When you see the photographs and you see that is what is literally true, it has an impact on credibility. Maybe I thought that this would have the same impact on Paul Paley. I don't remember the meeting really well. I remember that, for whatever reason, it was worth a shot trying to persuade him.

Paley left Hartnett's office unconvinced, and — at this writing — remains skeptical about the charges. Supporters of the Simpsons have tried to interest Paley in examining the case more closely, but Paley claims that, in the absence of some new evidence, his editors are reluctant to let him invest time and resources. Asked why he continues to believe in Simpson's innocence, Paley is unable to cite new evidence and relies solely on his instincts:

Again, my journalistic first-impression was that this does not look like a guilty guy. He's so open. No the least bit furtive, reticent, evasive. He was almost innocent. He felt he could trust me not to betray him. I've never seen someone like Mark who struck me as someone who could not have done this. I'm not a psychologist, but I have dealt with sex offenders and Mark Simpson didn't fit.

Two aspects of newswork — one typical of routine newsgathering and one probably more unique to episodes such as moral panics — are revealed by this story. First, the story is a vivid illustration of the symbiotic and competitive relations between media that marks much newsgathering. The Wilton Times is a prestigious daily newspaper that both commands a national stage and exerts substantial opinion leadership in Wilton and environs. Yet faced with one mildly sympathetic television interview of Mark Simpson that attracted public attention, this high ground was immediately deemed less important than local competitive pressures. A prestigious print outlet might scorn sensationalism and see print as a more legitimate source of news than television, but none of

this mattered when the Wilton Times feared it might be outflanked on an important story. In other words, only one compelling television image -- Mark Simpson in a jail cell -- led the Wilton Times to do its first story in several years on the Simpson family.

More importantly, however, this episode provides graphic evidence of how difficult it is during moral panics for newswriters to take contrary positions. While Hartnett had already won the case, and while the media in Wilton and Mountain Valley had overwhelmingly supported Hartnett's effort to convict Mark Simpson, Paley represented the lone loose end in the community's otherwise unanimous labeling celebration. While Hartnett was unsuccessful in this conversion effort, his meeting with Paley reveals the extent which such loose ends seem to threaten the moral consensus that characterizes the culmination of a moral panic.

This meeting was the last unusual episode that could be recalled by any of the newswriters covering the Mountain Valley case. From this point, until the day several months later when Mark Simpson was sentenced, virtually no print or broadcast coverage appeared in the Wilton media. Only two of the newswriters -- who covered the subsequent trial and conviction of Mary and Valerie Simpson -- ever filed another story about the Mountain Valley case. All three members of the Simpson family remain in prison, with Mark Simpson eligible for parole twenty years after his term began. Virtually all appeals have been exhausted.

The Culmination of the Reaction Stage:
The Panic Winds Down

While moral panics seem to begin with a sudden, dramatic incident, it is virtually impossible to determine the moment at which a community ceases to be concerned about a deviant threat. Indeed, public distress sometimes seems to persist long after the specific details of traumatic events are forgotten. The visible punishment of the deviants -- and the subsequent labelling celebration at the announcement of the verdict -- may quell some of the concern, but panics leave a residue of public anxiety that can serve as a fertile ground for subsequent panics. Sometimes this residual anxiety is fueled and sustained by a strengthened social control apparatus that continues to actively promote public concern about the problem. Sometimes the initial panic spawns public concern about related forms of deviance. On other occasions, claims-makers promote a so-called backlash, and argue that the original public concern was vastly exaggerated. Whatever the moral panic's aftermath, its end -- often marked by a creeping apathy -- is rarely as sudden and traumatic as its beginning.

The concluding chapter will specifically examine the culmination of the Mountain Valley panic and summarize the findings of the case study. What has been learned about newswork in a moral panic?

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUDING THE MOUNTAIN VALLEY CASE STUDY: IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH ON DEVIANCE, SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND THE MASS MEDIA

This final chapter will examine the end of the Mountain Valley panic, summarize the key findings of the case study, and discuss their implications for further research on deviance, social problems and the mass media. Finally, in a brief afterward, the lives of the newswriters after these turbulent events will be described.

"Judge Turns Down Appeals By Operators of Mountain Valley Day Care Center:" How Does a Moral Panic End?

Moral panics -- like any artificial construct -- do not unfold in logical, linear fashion. In fact, while the stages proposed by Cohen have provided a useful framework for this analysis, their utility seems much less compelling as the trial of Mark Simpson comes to a close. Moral panics might often begin with a sudden, shocking incident, but their end is much less clear. Public interest seems to simply fade away, and the tide of public indignation that once galvanized a community is gradually replaced by concern about other emerging problems. Cohen noted this problem when he attempted to describe the end of the reaction stage of the Mods and Rockers panic.

Although it is not implausible to suggest that something like this sequence may have operated, one problem immediately apparent in any attempt to generalize too rigidly from it, is that no readily available explanation exists as to how and why the sequence ever ends.

Certainly, the successful prosecution of the deviants does quell some of the public anxiety. Emerging during a period of extraordinary concern about the safety of children, the prosecution of Mark Simpson was a visible sign to the community that Wilton's agents of social control were serious about rooting out the deviant threat. As this study has revealed, this social control effort was often bolstered by a press that seemed to suspend normal standards of fairness and skepticism as it joined in the effort to combat the threat. The celebratory atmosphere that accompanied the guilty verdict graphically illustrated the community's relief that the control effort had been successful. Indeed, much of the news coverage in the final weeks implied that the threat had been defeated and the problem had been solved.

Yet aroused passions are not easily forgotten. While the details of a specific case may fade from memory, panics leave a residue of public anxiety that provide an even more fertile ground for subsequent panics. This residual anxiety is fueled and sustained by a strengthened social control apparatus that actively promotes public concern about the problem. Newly activated lawyers, social workers, and law enforcement personnel must now -- as the panic begins to lose steam -- justify their existence by continuing to detect and control the deviant behavior.

This is precisely what happened in the aftermath of the events in Mountain

Valley. During the three years that the trial galvanized the public's attention, several developments insured that the concern about child sexual abuse would persist after the Simpson case had ended. First, the State Social Services Department (SSD) increased the number of social workers assigned to investigate allegations of child sexual abuse. To aid their effort, the state passed a so-called mandatory reporting law requiring physicians, psychologists, social workers, and other professionals to report suspected cases of abuse. Not unexpectedly, this dramatically increased the frequency of reports of abuse.

Continued public awareness was also guaranteed by political developments in Wilton. Several influential politicians in the city happily discovered that veterans of a successful battle against deviance, especially child abuse, often become formidable candidates for public office. Attorney General Janet Reno, for example, came to national prominence as a result of her successful prosecution of the Country Walk child sexual abuse case in Florida (Hollingsworth 1986).

The moral panic about child sexual abuse also spread to other venues. In the months after the Simpson verdict, over 20 high-profile cases of child sexual abuse in day-care occurred throughout the United States, many bearing a strong resemblance to the events in Mountain Valley. Extensive coverage in the national media helped facilitate the panic's spread (Nathan 1991).

Prosecutor Hartnett found himself frequently contacted by prosecutors in other

jurisdictions for advice on child sexual abuse cases. Originally, Mountain Valley had been widely viewed as Wilton's version of the McMartin case. Now the next cities to confront the threat would have their "Mountain Valley."

While concern about abuse in day-care seemed to fade over the next several years, the moral panic that began with a concern about child sexual abuse eventually spawned several related social problems. Both child molestation by priests and so-called recovered memories of incest have emerged as the dominant forms of sexual deviance in the mass media. These emotional issues have been vigorously contested in a plethora of news accounts, criminal and civil trials, and television talk shows.

Perhaps the most interesting legacy of the panic about child sexual abuse in day-care has been the emergence of an active, robust backlash movement (Hechler 1988; Myers 1994). This movement arose as a direct response to those who promoted and encouraged public concern about child sexual abuse. Arguing that the rights of innocent people had been ignored in the rush to solve the problem, the backlash movement urged that concern for the victim be accompanied by a corresponding concern for the rights of the accused (Spiegel 1986). The eventual acquittal of all defendants in the McMartin child sexual abuse case fueled this backlash, and a number of the convictions in child sexual abuse are in various stages of appeal.

The defendant frequently cited by those in the backlash movement is Margaret Kelly Michaels, a former pre-school teacher who was convicted in

1988 of sexually abusing 19 children at a day care center in Maplewood, New Jersey. In mid-1990, two lengthy articles were published in national publications proclaiming Ms. Michaels's innocence (Nathan 1990; Rabinowitz 1990) and in July, 1993, she was freed when an appellate court found that the testimony of the alleged child victims, which the judge allowed to be videotaped in his chambers, represented a violation of her constitutional rights under the sixth amendment. In November, 1994 New Jersey prosecutors chose not to retry Ms. Michaels.

For the most part, however, news stories about abuse in day-care centers are rare. While stories about recovered memories of childhood abuse and sexual abuse by priests would begin to appear in the late 1980s, the moral panic about sexual abuse in day-care had all but disappeared from local and national media by 1989.

Now, almost a decade since the events in Mountain Valley first took place, what conclusions can be drawn from the case study about the role of the mass media in the social construction of a moral panic?

Key Findings of the Mountain Valley Case Study

The Mountain Valley case study yielded a number of findings that can inform both the sociology of news and studies of moral panic. It is important to again note, however, that Mountain Valley was a special case that took place in the midst of a period of unusually intense moral indignation.

However, while the applicability of the findings to other cases is unclear, they

can suggest potentially fruitful avenues for subsequent research. Indeed, this exploratory function of qualitative research is often cited as the key strength of the case study method.

Given this qualification, what are the most significant findings of the Mountain Valley case study?

Newsworker/Source Relations:
The Special Role of Anonymous Sources

One of the most widely shared findings of work in the sociology of news is the symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship between reporters and official sources. This relationship, described extensively in Chapter III, is offered as the explanation for the preferred reading given official accounts of events. Reporters and officials work together, often share similar world views, and need each other to successfully complete their work (Fishman 1980, 1981; Gans 1979; Roshco 1975; Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1972, 1978). Fishman's work, in particular, illustrates how the newsworker/source relationship is marked by a shared reliance on "phase structures", or officially defined expectations of the sequence in which events will unfold. In other words, official versions are accorded preferred status in the context of a bureaucratically organized relationship, and — contrary to popular notions — are rarely imposed by force or conspiracy.

This reliance on official sources, and the preferred reading given their versions of events, is confirmed by the Mountain Valley case. Throughout the case, the newsworkers effectively allowed the prosecution to define the case

against the Simpsons and, more generally, to define child sexual abuse as a problem that posed a basic and serious threat to the social order. For the entire three year period, the newswriters continued to reproduce these official views and constructed news accounts that clearly favored the prosecution.

This was accomplished in stories stressing that child sexual abuse was a "mushrooming" problem, stories that used highly charged symbols like "clowns" and "magic rooms" to connect the Mountain Valley case to other child sexual abuse cases, and stories that included only a brief denial from the defense. Headlines were a more overt manifestation of this preference, with readers being asked on the eve of the trial to "believe the children." Finally, this preference for the prosecution was most evident in the coverage of the verdict, in which the newswriters seemed to join in the "labeling celebration" that marked the community's triumph over the deviant threat.

More specifically, however, the Mountain Valley case revealed the extent to which official *anonymous* sources play a special role during moral panics. Anonymity provided official sources with an opportunity to select reporters likely to be sympathetic, ignore those suspected of sympathy for the defense, and strategically release information likely to support the prosecution.

The first evidence of the role of anonymous sources can be seen in the panic's impact stage, during which newswriters scrambled to nurture official sources who could confirm that children had been sexually abused. Such a source did emerge, but -- to the chagrin of those covering the case -- chose to

remain anonymous and speak with only one reporter who he felt could most effectively publicize police efforts to root out the deviance.

Indeed, the origins of the Mountain Valley panic are very much embedded in that initial competitive skirmish, as the published revelations gathered from the source by Sally McDonald of the tabloid Wilton American created the impression of a growing, unavoidable menace. For the crucial first several weeks of the episode, as investigators were ostensibly uncovering the truth, leaks by the anonymous source led to misleading stories implying that the allegations had already been substantiated. In this way, even allegations that were eventually discredited could be used as weapons in the public opinion battle between the defense and the prosecution.

At the same time, the Mountain Valley case revealed that newswriters without access to the anonymous official source were able to improvise alternate newsgathering strategies that went a long way in meeting the demands made by their editors for more news. Precluded from dealing with the source closest to the investigation, these reporters chose instead to develop relationships with the parents of the alleged victims, social welfare officials, and the friends and supporters of the defendants. While the newswriters got a felt that these sources were less valued than a direct line to the police department, they proved to be rich sources of information for the next several years.

This leads to the most important example in the Mountain Valley case

study of the extent to which an anonymous source — aided by an eager and willing newswriter — played a central role in fueling and advancing the atmosphere of moral panic. What, in particular, was learned from the extended discussion of the widely publicized child pornography allegations?

The Child Pornography Allegation:
An Anonymous Source as Fuel for a Panic

Virtually every person interviewed for this study agrees that the child pornography allegation — leaked by an anonymous official source to Sally McDonald — was the defining moment of the entire Mountain Valley episode. McDonald's story claimed that "the production of kiddie porn was a full-scale, behind the scenes operation" at the Mountain Valley Day Care Center. The initial story was published in the Wilton American and, within a day, repeated in both the Mountain Valley Courier and the Wilton Times. The story was not independently confirmed by any of the newspapers and contained none of the qualifying language such as "alleged" or "possible" that would have blunted its impact. The story became the Mountain Valley panic's dominant atrocity tale, and — while no evidence ever surfaced to confirm it — led to an escalation of public outrage and a mobilization of a variety of social control measures.

How did this happen? In fact, this is a significant question, given the fact that similarly unfounded stories surfaced in many of the other day-care sexual abuse cases that were beginning to take place at the same time. In the McMartin case, for example, headlines trumpeted the discovery of child pornography, but no photographs or other evidence ever surfaced. Eventually,

Los Angeles Times reporter David Shaw received a Pulitzer prize for his series of stories explaining how and why his newspaper published these discredited stories (1990). Indeed, the Mountain Valley case study offered a fascinating glimpse at the process of decision-making and the institutional pressures that led three newspapers to publish these allegations.

There is simply no question that the intense competition between the media outlets -- fueled by an extraordinary wave of public indignation -- led to the publication of everything from rumors to substantiated facts. Believing that their readers were hungry for every tidbit, reporters and editors made a conscious decision to suspend their normal skepticism and publish as much news about the case as possible. This was the case at both the tabloid Wilton American and the more prestigious Wilton Times. Indeed, Wilton Times editor Charles Jackson provided perhaps the most honest and revealing explanation of how news stories of unusual public interest affect the process of newsroom decision-making:

There are some cases where what is being pursued is as important as what is being found. The Mountain Valley case registered very high on the interest and recognition level. Every possible line you can come up with, in terms of what's going to happen next, who's down, who's up, who's in, who's out, you report it whether you can confirm or not. If there's a report out there, you report it, you don't wait. Everything that's out there, given the hold on the public, you report it. We don't have to be right.

Jackson's statement that "we don't have to be right" was an extraordinary admission by the editor of one of the most highly regarded newspapers in the United States. It clearly signals that, in certain periods, widely accepted

standards quickly yield to a tidal wave of public interest. The kind of skepticism and scrutiny by reporters that might act as a brake on these panics, or at least slow their momentum, is swept away in a competitive frenzy.

Yet another explanation surfaced for this suspension of skepticism. Reporters were simply afraid to admit that they didn't know about the latest rumor to surface. Confronted with an allegation they didn't know about, they were likely to engage what in "feigned knowing." Wilton American reporter Steve Baylor provided the clearest statement of this phenomena, when he frankly admitted that "reporters were afraid to admit what they didn't know." Rather than be revealed as out of the loop, reporters simply told their colleagues that they already knew about the latest revelation. The result, Baylor suggested, was that you often had "two guys sitting there and lying to each other."

The child pornography story that flourished in this competitive milieu symbolically connected the Mountain Valley case to the McMartin case and the twelve other nationally publicized child sexual abuse cases in which a pornography motive was alleged. Further, this story appeared just at the time when the federal government was turning its attention to the problem of child pornography. The result was that the labelled deviants gradually came to be defined in media accounts less as three people being tried for a serious crime than as conspirators in an expanding national morality play. Spread by newswriters who were more concerned about competing successfully with

each other than with verifying facts, and bolstered by a growing national concern with child pornography, the story was one of the panic's defining moments.

Language and the Social Construction of a Moral Panic

Given the fact that the Mountain Valley case study focused specifically on the role of print journalists, it is perhaps not surprising that the role of language was so central to the panic's construction. Language, after all, is the raw material of print journalism. However, even given this obvious finding, it is notable how much of the Mountain Valley panic was constructed on the contested terrain of language. Again and again, all the parties to the case -- including editors, reporters, attorneys and community members -- engaged in fiercely argued disputes about the words that would be used in accounts of the case. These disputes, and how they were eventually resolved, played a fundamental role in determining both the content of the coverage and the course of the entire episode.

Only days after the first frenzied meeting of parents, what might be called the "language of contagion" began to create the impression that the allegations were credible and that the problem was escalating. Early stories, relying on such phrases as "the tip of the iceberg," "this thing is unraveling minute by minute," and "no one's sure how far it will lead," constructed a world in which what had allegedly happened was almost certain to happen again. And an early imprecision in news accounts about the number of victims -- in which

the number of alleged victims subtly shifted from "Kid Sex Victims May Total 20" to "dozens more youths may have been attacked" – implied that the number would continue to grow. Language, in other words, served as the raw material of panic construction, implying that the morality play about to unfold had a certain tragic inevitability and that the participants were virtually powerless to stop the inexorable course of events.

Later, in the extended dispute between reporters, editors, and advertisers over the language used to explicitly describe the allegations, it is possible to see another way that language advanced the course of a moral panic. Because of the heated newsroom debates described in Chapter VI, virtually no news accounts explicitly described the nature of the alleged abusive acts. This meant that consumers of panic news read accounts in which euphemisms such as "deviant sex acts" and "abuse" raised more questions than they answered. Much research on panic suggests that the public, desperate to explain and understand a deviant threat, are likely to "fill-in" such missing information in a manner that confirms, indeed escalates, the reality of a panic (Barker 1965; Medalia and Larsen 1958; Parker and Greenberg 1965). In other words, vague and imprecise language can serve as a symbolic vessel in which people's worst fears and concerns can be invested.

It is interesting to note that the constructionist literature informing this study now strongly emphasizes the role of language. In particular, Best – whose work has been a central guide to the Mountain Valley case study – has

placed language and rhetoric at the center of his work on the social construction of missing and endangered children. Such an emphasis, he suggests, is simply too central to ignore:

Sociologists of social problems and social movements cannot afford to ignore the rhetoric used in making claims. Rhetoric reflects both the nature of the interaction between particular claims-makers and their audience, and the larger cultural context within which claims-making occurs. In turn, rhetorical choices affect the success or failure of specific claims. The message -- as well as the medium of claims-making -- merits further study. (1987:17)

Even more recently, Kitsuse -- whose work with Malcolm Spector stimulated much subsequent constructionist research (1977) -- has for the first time offered an updating of his earlier work. Now language takes center stage, with Ibarra and Kitsuse suggesting that the rhetoric and vocabulary of social problems are the most fundamental way that problems are socially constructed by claims-makers and understood by the public (1993). Social problems theory, Kitsuse now suggests, is "a language game into which actions are translated as publicly (and variously) readable expressions" (1993:27).

The Mountain Valley case affirmed the centrality of language in the social construction of a moral panic and revealed an important consideration for further research: Much of the language that was finally used in news accounts resulted from a complex process of conflict, negotiation, and compromise. Further, even the sometimes heated disputes of reporters and editors sometimes could not be isolated from the external pressures exerted by powerful publishers and advertisers. When an editor protested to a reporter

that he "didn't want readers vomiting in their cheerios," the reporter knew precisely and implicitly which words would have to be changed. When Wilton's largest department store threatened to pull advertising, editors quickly decided that the euphemism "deviant acts" would have to replace more explicit terminology.

Language, in other words, is as much a process as a product. This suggests that media studies relying solely on content analysis might very well miss the complex processes that underlie beyond the most innocuous word choice. Certainly, the Mountain Valley study's key findings about the "language of contagion" and the dispute over euphemisms were only possible because the case study examined both the process of newswork and the resulting news product.

Newswork in a Moral Panic:
Toward a Synthesis with the Sociology of Emotions

Of all the findings of the Mountain Valley case study, perhaps the most surprising and significant was the emergence of emotion as a variable explaining the nature of newswork in a moral panic. While experienced in covering violent and painful stories, the newswriters frequently found themselves unable to avoid feelings of shock about the alleged acts and sympathy for the child victims. The result was that they often could not maintain the kind of emotional distance from the highly-charged case that would have allowed the dispassionate evaluation of evidence.

This is not to suggest that the newswriters did not try to be dispassionate.

Indeed, a key finding of the case study was that anxiety about emotional involvement led the newswriters to engage in what I have called "hyper-objectivity." Taken aback by their own feelings, newswriters wrote stories with excerpts of the trial transcript that they felt would avoid any subjective content. Yet even these stories, which attempted -- as an editor explained -- to "stick with what was said and not so much with subjective description," did not really avoid subjectivity.

The implicit assumption of this strategy is that there is something pure or objective about verbatim transcripts. Yet verbatim testimony is itself a socially constructed version of reality resulting from the interactive process between attorneys and witnesses. Further, because the trial's agenda is essentially set by the prosecution, who presents the initial roster of witnesses and first questions each witness, the testimony in many criminal trials is very much embedded in the prosecution's theory of the case. Consequently, simply reprinting transcripts of the children's testimony without critical analysis or descriptions of courtroom ambience -- while satisfying the newswriters' need to be perceived as objective -- effectively granted official institutions the dominant position as the primary definers of the case. Further, it meant that this testimony -- which was the core of the case against Mark Simpson -- tended to be presented in news accounts without any analysis of its believability or consistency.

Finally, the case study revealed that the intense emotions felt by the

newswriters left them -- by their own report -- predisposed to believe the children when they finally took the stand. Emotionally moved as they watched the children's explicit and painful testimony, and unable to accept the possibility that children could lie about such explicit matters, the newswriters wrote uncritical accounts that avoided any mention of the possibility that the children might not be telling the truth. The result was that, at the episode's seminal moment, the press visibly reinforced the reality of the deviant threat.

It is important to mention that this important finding about emotions and newswriting was very much a vindication of the case study method. While the Mountain Valley began with the basic theoretical orientation of the constructionists, it was not limited by a rigid, pre-determined set of questions. Rather, the choice of the case study method, as the section on research methodology made clear, was intended to facilitate the discovery of every variable that could explain newswriting in a moral panic. There is simply no way that the existing sociology of news literature would have predicted that each newswriter would describe an emotional trauma similar to the other parties directly involved in the case. Neither would it have been easy to predict that their published and broadcast stories would be so directly affected by this trauma. The Mountain Valley study demonstrated the relationship between emotions and newswriting, and future studies will be similarly enriched by a synthesis of the sociology of emotions with more traditional studies of newswriting.

Moral Panics and the Quality of Public Discourse:
Some Concluding Observations

This study began by suggesting that moral panics are the social equivalent of physical disasters, doing violence to the quality of public discourse and damaging existing social structures and relationships. Indeed, both Erikson's and Cohen's work similarly relied on the metaphor of physical disaster, and demonstrated how disaster research can inform our understanding of crime waves, moral panics, and other epidemics of deviance. While the present study has focused on the processes of newswork, it now seems appropriate to offer some concluding observations on the more general effects of moral panics. How might moral panics affect how we think, act, and talk about social problems?

One of the most notable characteristics of moral panics is the extent to which any subtlety or middle ground in the public discourse about the threat is virtually obliterated. The atmosphere of fear and anxiety, combined with the intense competition among newswriters, seems to leave no room for the kind of reasoned discussion in which the complexity of an issue can emerge. In the case of the Mountain Valley Day Care Center, this meant that the children were depicted as either venal liars or sainted vessels of the truth, that the Simpsons were seen as either victims of a horrible injustice or evil child molesters, and that the larger issue of child sexual abuse was defined as either a national epidemic or a witch hunt. Of course, the most dominant view was that child sexual abuse represented a fundamental threat to the social order,

and that the Simpsons were visible manifestations of that deviant threat.

It is also the case that views opposing prevailing public sentiments have a very hard time being heard. Such minority voices are seen as heretical, disloyal, and almost as threatening as the deviant threat itself. Enormous effort is invested in converting these voices and, failing such conversion, in ostracizing those willing to remain outside the boundaries of the dominant discourse. Consider the case of Wilton Times reporter Paul Paley. Alone among his colleagues, he questioned the strength of the case against the Simpsons. Yet this simple skepticism led to intense scorn by his colleagues and to a bizarre episode in which the prosecutor used examples of child pornography to convert him to the cause. Paley provided an apt description of the difficulty faced by anyone offering an alternate view:

During these periods, you are either on the side of truth, justice, the American way and the flag -- which is to say the prosecution -- or you're against all the little children. That's how people divide the world.

What about the impact of such an atmosphere on the defendant? Indeed, it is impossible to complete a case study of this scope, involving such extensive contact with the involved parties, without eventually wondering about the impact of these turbulent events on the defendant's ability to receive a fair trial. Obviously, the study points to the overwhelming preference given the prosecution's version of events. But did this preference -- and the larger local and national atmosphere of moral panic -- actually affect the verdict?

In fact, while it might seem obvious that such an atmosphere would

directly affect the criminal justice process, this is actually an extremely difficult question to answer. The Mountain Valley case did reveal a distinct pro-prosecution bias in virtually all aspects of the coverage. And every party to the case deeply believed that the case's coverage was the most important variable that would determine the ultimate verdict. Yet neither could any of the respondents explain precisely how bias affects the eventual verdict. Observers took for granted that the dominant zeitgeist of fear about child sexual abuse would be crucial, but no one could explain how and why this would happen.

In fact, when pressed, the newswriters expressed doubt that a tainted verdict was inevitable. Steve Baylor of the Wilton American was typically skeptical of pre-trial publicity:

I'm a big disbeliever in the idea that pre-trial publicity will affect a verdict. I am offended by the notion that the system inherently believes that juries are stupid and easily led. It's the same fiction that says that news is objective and that opinion is subjective. To say that you are going to get a jury that is devoid of biases to insure fairness is malarkey. I believe that lawyers make the press more important in the minds of the jury than the jurors themselves. I think they could have sat an Oswald jury. They could have sat a Watergate jury.

But Baylor and his journalistic colleagues might have been expected to believe that the press did not necessarily affect a verdict. What of those more directly involved in the trial? While this question was not central to the Mountain Valley study, a surprisingly revealing answer emerged during an interview with prosecutor William Hartnett. Hartnett was asked why, if the evidence was so clearly persuasive, he spent so much time trying to win over the press. His answer reveals the extent to which political considerations affect the zeal with

which a prosecutor approaches a case:

I was as conscious of bringing the press around as I was of persuading the jury. I didn't want a conviction with the rest of the world speculating about whether it was just or fair. For me, a lot of the consideration is not so much practical – in terms of how this is going to impact on the administration of justice – but more political. You're in this job. It's a government job. You're serving the public. You want the public to feel you are doing a good job. That was certainly a big piece of it. There's a certain amount of loyalty to the office and to your boss. You want people to think that your office is doing a good job. I dub that political.

But beyond political considerations, in which the prosecutor plays both to his external constituency and to the jury, Hartnett revealed a factor not often mentioned by prosecutors. Prospective jurors may swear that they have not been exposed to pre-trial publicity, but are they always telling the truth?

Hartnett reveals the underlying fear that drives much of the attempt by attorneys on both sides of a case to aggressively fight the battle of public opinion. Maybe, he suggests, prospective jurors do not always tell the truth:

The other side is much more complicated. You always wonder whether and how the people who are going to decide your case might somehow be impacted by the press. There's this fiction that jurors are not supposed to be influenced by the press. That they're not supposed to read papers or watch TV. You assume that may be the case, but what if it's not? The judge tells them not to. They come in and say they didn't. What if they did? And sometimes they do. In the back of your mind, you wonder if they are following the instructions or not. To the extent that the coverage filters through, you want it to be positive. But nobody will ever acknowledge that openly. We all live under the fiction that the press coverage is irrelevant to the jurors.

While outside the scope of this study, Hartnett's comments do provide some interesting answers to questions about impact on the judicial process.

Subsequent studies in sociology, criminal justice, and law should examine this

issue more closely and attempt to more fully explain the impact of the mass media on jury deliberations. While the popular notion is that the mass media are a pivotal force in the system of justice, this process has yet to be fully understood.

A final word about the hastily developed public policies that are the legacy of moral panics. The lack of subtlety and complexity in public discourse also extends to the remedies that are developed to respond to the deviant threat. After the deviants are punished, public demands for action are often met with increased funds, stiffer punishments, and a strengthened machinery of social control. The statistics that "prove" that the problem is growing are rarely questioned and, instead, are confidently cited as the justification for quick action. In the Mountain Valley case, as well as in many of the day-care sexual abuse cases, the "mushrooming" reports of abuse were used to justify a dramatically bolstered social welfare apparatus to fight the threat. Lawyers, social workers, prosecutors, and other professionals were quickly hired to specifically deal with the growing problem. Only several years later, when the indignation faded, were these policies reconsidered. By then, of course, yet another threat to the social order was commanding the resources previously devoted to child sexual abuse. Indeed, several years later, the threat that had been a source of such fear and anxiety was even hard to recall. Yesterday's assault on society's most cherished values became old news.

Supreme Court Justice Brandeis provided perhaps the most succinct

statement of the rush to judgement that characterizes times of public frenzy.

Concerned that we are most vulnerable to such episodes at precisely those moments when we are most certain of our good intentions, Brandeis urged us to remember that

...experience should teach us most to be on our guard to protect liberty when the government's purposes are beneficent...The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachments by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding. (Olmstead v. United States 1928:479)

A Brief Afterward:

What Happened to the Newswriters?

For the reporters, the Simpson verdict marked the end of one of the most turbulent periods of their lives. Given the nature of newswriting, most were back at work the next week. Within months, all were busy covering a unusual homicide that attracted national attention. Yet several years later, when the interviews for this study were completed, most were unable to forget the impact of the events in Mountain Valley on their personal and professional lives.

In fact, the case was at least the partial impetus for significant career changes: Carol Jones of WPQR-Radio left Wilton and began work as a disk jockey. Steve Baylor of the Wilton American and Annette Marshall of WMNO-Radio took jobs in the public sector. James Redman of the Mountain Valley Courier tired of working at a shoestring community newspaper and began work on a much larger and stable daily. And Sally McDonald, whose early leak of the child pornography allegation had fueled so much of the panic,

refused her newspaper's request that she cover the next trial of Mark Simpson's mother and sister. Her comments are similar to those made by her colleagues:

Well, I can tell you. I never want to cover another case like that. They asked if I wanted to cover it. I said: No way! I also felt that it wouldn't be fair to the Simpsons to have me cover it. By the end of it, I felt like I had been through a war. I felt weary. It was emotionally draining. And I went home at night very depressed. It didn't do great wonders for my private life. I felt so caught up in it. It just absorbed my whole life. Really worn by it. Because you feel so badly for everybody.

Ironically, several years later McDonald joined a more prestigious daily.

Paul Paley and Les Osborn remain at the Wilton Times. Paley is a general assignment reporter and has never pursued his interest in Mark Simpson's innocence. Les Osborn remains in his small office at the courthouse and still covers every high-profile trial in McKinley County. Editors Carl Mason of the Wilton American and Charles Jackson of the Wilton Times remain at their respective newspapers.

The Mountain Valley case was also, in retrospect, a watershed moment for both the Wilton Times and the Wilton American. The Wilton Times management, while not jettisoning its prestigious tradition, began to pay more attention to high-profile sensational stories. Indeed, this shift to a more aggressive style covering local news could be seen during the Mountain Valley case, as the paper struggled to compete with both its crosstown tabloid competitor and local television stations. Within months, when another similarly sensational case came to light, the Wilton Times devoted unprecedented

resources to competing with both the local and national tabloid media. The Wilton American, on the other hand, continued to face pressure from advertisers to tone down their sensational content. While the Wilton American's owner Andrew Post had been a pioneer of what his reporters called the journalism of "tits, tots, and terror," he quickly realized that he would have to address the concerns of those who were paying the bills. While the Wilton American did not completely shed its tabloid style, the headlines gradually got smaller and the language became less explicit.

Within a year of Mark Simpson's guilty verdict, Mary and Valerie Simpson were convicted in a separate trial. All three remain in prison, with Mark Simpson eligible for parole twenty years after his term began. And the moral panic that once galvanized a city gradually became a distant memory, recalled only occasionally by the people who had played central roles in a turbulent and emotional time.

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