

Mean Girls in The Press:  
A Content Analysis of Two Toronto Newspapers

By

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**Abstract**

Recent criminological scholarship characterizes media attention to aggressive girls, or “mean girls,” as a moral panic, which is correlated with the creation of increasingly punitive antibullying policies in North America. Content analysis was used to uncover how news attention to youth aggression around the time of Reena Virk’s murder contributed to this moral panic in Toronto newspapers. Results indicate that Virk’s murder helped change the frequency and nature of news coverage of girls’ bullying. Reporting on girls’ bullying significantly increased and the dominant news frame falsely presented girls’ bullying as a major and rising problem in schools. The news coverage coincided with the development of more punitive Canadian youth policies. Recommendations for future research, theoretical development, and media practice are provided.

*Keywords:* Moral panic, mean girls, youth aggression, newspapers, Canada.

# MEAN GIRLS IN THE PRESS

## **Dedication**

For my mother Susan.

Without your never ending love, support, and friendship,  
none of this would have been possible.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Welcome to “girl world,” where, we are told, the rules of popularity are rigidly enforced by a group of ‘queen bees’ and ‘wannabes’ (Wiseman 2002). The manipulative and damaging characteristics of girls’ social worlds have been the subject of a spate of popular books..., and their publication prompted innumerable newspaper articles on the topic of girls’ aggression. (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008, p. 11)

It is often said that girls today are no longer, “sugar and spice and everything nice.” They are, instead, frequently portrayed as, “sugar ‘n’ spice and anything but nice” (Williamson, *The Sun*, 1997, Dec. 5, p. 16). This belief that girls are becoming increasingly aggressive is a popular topic of media, political, and academic discussion (Adler & Worrall, 2004; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010; Schissel, 1997, 2006). Much of these discussions reflect public concerns that women and girls are abandoning traditional femininity by leaving behind approved behaviours such as devout motherhood and unimposing, sweet dispositions. Instead, they are allegedly embracing an alarming number of traditionally masculine traits, including aggressive behaviours such as violence, gang membership, and murder.

However, the notion that girls are becoming progressively meaner and more violent lacks empirical support, and public anxiety for girls is misinformed, misdirected, and dangerous (Adler & Worrall, 2004; Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; DeKeseredy, 2010; Jiwani, 1999; Schissel, 1997, 2006). Despite the realities of girls’ aggression, research shows that Canadian news media continue to propagate mean girl hype. The murder of Reena Virk in 1997 is a prime example of an unfortunate bullying incident that incurred a tidal wave of negative media attention to aggressive girls

(Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Jiwani, 1999; Schissel, 1997, 2006). It is to Virk's murder that I now turn.

### **The Murder of Reena Virk**

Reena Virk was a 14-year-old girl of South Asian descent. She was beaten to death on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1997 by a group of seven girls and one boy whose ages ranged between 14 to 16 years-of-age (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Jiwani, 1999; Rajiva & Batacharya, 2010). The beating allegedly began as a result of an accusation that Virk had stolen one of the girls' boyfriends and had spread rumours about her. After the initial beating, Virk attempted to escape her assailants but two – Warren Glowatski and Kelly Ellard – followed her and then beat her until she was unconscious. They then dragged her body under a bridge and into the water, drowning her. On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1997, Virk's body was found and the autopsy revealed that her, "injuries were similar to those that would result from a car being driven over a body. The pathologist concluded that Reena would probably have died even if she had not been drowned" (Jiwani, 2010, p. 87).

Virk's murder has since been identified as a watershed case of female bullying in Canada because: (a) it resulted in a young girl's murder; (b) Virk's attackers were primarily young girls; (c) the attack was exceptionally violent; and (d) it began because of rumours and jealousy, which are regular non-violent youth misbehaviours. Numerous scholars (e.g., Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Jiwani, 1999; Rajiva & Batacharya, 2010; Schissel, 2006) argue that this case inspired a media frenzy over the alleged increasing meanness of young girls. Media reports over inflated the problem of girls' aggression while masking its more problematic underlying causes (e.g., patriarchy and racism) (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Jiwani, 1999).

The media frenzy following Virk's murder has been linked to the creation of harmful, punitive, zero-tolerance antibullying programs in schools and youth and criminal justice policies (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Schissel, 2006). As such, it is essential that researchers understand how this public anxiety unfolded in the media and to what extent it affected the creation of harmful policies and programs.

### **The Purpose of this Thesis**

Concern over girls' aggression developed through its portrayal in media as a threat to traditional gender norms (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010; DeKeseredy, 2010; Males, 2010; Ringrose, 2006). This anxiety over endangered girlhood resulted in the creation of a new folk devil, which is a symbolic, stereotypical, and socially constructed carrier of social harm (Cohen, 1987). Media Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin (2008) identify this folk devil as the "mean girl", and Barron and Lacombe (2005) identify it as the "nasty girl".

Regardless of multiple labels, this unwholesome female character is consistently described as the antithesis of traditional femininity. The mean girl is typically characterized as a popular and conniving bully who is sneaky, cruel, controlling, and manipulative. She is also strong willed, promiscuous, very sexual in her dress and character, and will stop at nothing to remain, or attain, the status of *Queen Bee*, including violence (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). Rosalind Wiseman (2009) describes the *Queen Bee* as;

The epitome of teen girl perfection. Through a combination of charisma, force, money, looks, will and social intelligence, this girl reigns supreme over the other girls and weakens their friendships with others, thereby strengthening her own

power and influence. Never underestimate her power over other girls (and boys as well). She can and will silence her peers with a look and then turn around and be incredibly nice. But the bottom line is you're on her side or else – you are with her or against her. (p. 87)

The mean girl can be observed in various media outlets, such as three popular Hollywood films of 2004 titled; *Mean Girls*, *A Cinderella Story*, and *13 Going on 30*. The *Mean Girls* movie was so popular that it inspired a sequel in 2011. This folk devil is also in television programs such as *Odd Girl Out*, and trade books such as *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (Wiseman, 2009), *See Jane Hit* (Garbarino, 2006), and *When She Was Bad* (Pearson, 1997).

These examples of mean girls in the press only modestly convey the pervasiveness of this public concern. As I show in Chapter 2, there is still a great need for research on Canadian journalistic attention to girls' bullying. Guided by Stanley Cohen's (1987) theory of moral panic (which I discuss in Chapter 3), my thesis contributes to this body of knowledge through an in-depth mixed methods content analysis of Toronto news attention to girls' bullying before compared to after Virk's murder. Although it is ideal for feminist media study, moral panic theory is only recently coming into feminist research. This study, however, shows how mean girl moral panic legitimizes patriarchy and the continued control and marginalization of girls.

### **Outline of This Thesis**

In the next chapter, I define the key terms used in this thesis and examine the major debates on girls' bullying and youth aggression. I then briefly review research on newspaper representations of non-traditional femininities in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada to identify trends in reporting. The existing Canadian studies

demonstrate that after Virk's murder, journalists focused strongly on mean girls as a growing social concern. This media attention has been characterized as a moral panic (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Jiwani, 1999; Schissel, 1997, 2006). Still, due to methodological reasons, they cannot show whether, how, and to what extent, local Canadian news attention to bullying changed immediately following Virk's murder. This study offers that analysis.

Chapter 3 provides the theoretical framework for my study. I describe the key elements of Cohen's (1987) theory of moral panic, and offer examples of moral panics in Canada. The chapter closes with a review of criticisms of this theory.

Chapter 4 offers a description of, and reasoning for, the quantitative and qualitative methods I used in this study and I present my findings in Chapter 5. I discovered three prominent news frames in the sample, as well as a drastic increase in news attention to girls' bullying immediately after Virk's murder compared to the six-months prior to it.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the major themes found within the news frames. Then, I explain the limitations of my study, suggest avenues for future research, and provide policy recommendations. Finally, I offer some concluding thoughts on mean girl moral panic in Canada.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a moral panic about mean girls in North America (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). Here, I provide a review of the relevant literature on this topic. I begin by defining key terms used in this thesis, including: aggression; violent aggression; relational aggression; direct and indirect aggression; and bullying. Then, three major debates about mean girl moral panic in the press are discussed. This chapter concludes with a review of the literature on the consequences of mean girl moral panic, the research on non-traditional and violent femininities in newspapers, and studies of mean girl moral panic in Canadian newspapers.

### Definitions

*Aggression* is a widely used term in bullying research because it is more than just physical violence. It includes a broad variety of hurtful behaviours that can be either *direct* (i.e., overt attacks such as violence and teasing) or *indirect* (i.e., covert actions such as social exclusion) in nature (Olweus, 1994). Additionally, aggression can be broken down into two categories: *violent aggression* and *relational aggression*. While there is no consensus on the definitions of these two categories, for the purpose of this thesis, *violent aggression* is defined as physical acts such as hitting, kicking, punching, and murder. *Relational aggression*, on the other hand, includes non-physical acts such as rolling one's eyes, teasing, social isolation, and spreading rumours. Some acts of relational aggression are direct (e.g., teasing), while others are indirect (e.g., exclusion), though all acts of violent aggression are direct in nature.

Aggression in schools is most often referred to as *bullying*, though bullying is somewhat different from aggression. According to Dan Olweus (1994), unlike aggression

which can be a single act, bullying is characterized by the repeated use of aggression from one or more youths to another (or more). Thus, when discussing bullying, I refer to young people who repeatedly act aggressively toward other youths, not those who have exhibited one or two uncharacteristic acts of aggression.

### **Major Debates in Bullying Literature**

There are three major debates in bullying literature. The first is whether or not relational bullying is equal to violent bullying. The second is whether boys and girls are equally aggressive in both categories, while the third debate is about whether girls are indeed becoming more aggressive as reported by media.

#### **Is all aggression similarly hurtful, and do boys and girls use it equally?**

Recent media accounts of bullying assert that violent aggression is equal to relational aggression and that boys and girls are equally aggressive, though girls are meaner (Chesney-Lind, Morash, & Irwin, 2007). These arguments reflect popular beliefs about intimate partner violence. Indeed, Patricia Pearson (1997) strongly conveyed this notion in the following quotation:

On the whole, men do indeed have a more powerful left hook. The problem is that the dynamic of domestic violence is not analogous to two differently weighted boxers in a ring. There are relational strategies and psychological issues at work in an intimate relationship that negate the fact of physical strength. At the heart of the matter lies human will. (p. 117)

While Pearson's quotation specifically referred to aggression in intimate partner relationships, the book in which it was published (*When She Was Bad: Violent Women and the Myth of Innocence*, Pearson, 1997) communicates that all females (i.e., girls and women) and males are equally capable of aggression. This aggression, she posits, is similarly violent as it is relational, and relational aggression is no better than violent

aggression. Pearson admits that males are more capable of harm than females (e.g., “men do indeed have a more powerful left hook”), but she based her sex-symmetry of violence thesis on the belief that *will* to harm is more important than *ability* to harm. The implication is similar to the old adage: “It’s the thought that counts.”

Pearson accuses academics such as Walter DeKeseredy of misleading the public to believe that females are predominantly the victims of aggression rather than the principal aggressors. Academics supposedly achieve this deception by concealing data from the public showing that, “physical aggression by young women in premarital romance is among the best documented” (Pearson, 1997, p. 122).

To support these false allegations, Pearson (1997) presented a study from the University of Manitoba in 1989 showing that “39.1 percent of the women in her [Reena Sommer; a social scientist] survey had responded that they had committed acts of violence against their spouses at some point in their relationship, with 16.2 percent of those acts defined as severe” (p. 122). This example is intended to show that there is equal aggression among the sexes. However, not only does Pearson neglect to provide comparable statistics for males, the term “severe” is not defined and is therefore ambiguous, and there is no consideration for contexts, meanings, and motives of the violent acts.

Pearson’s perspectives on gender, violence, and aggression are very typical of popular antifeminist discussions on this topic<sup>1</sup>. However, the equation of male and female use of relational and violent aggression has received much criticism by many critical and feminist criminologists, sociologists, and communications’ scholars.

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<sup>1</sup> See DeKeseredy (2011) and Dragiewicz (2011) for a review of antifeminist arguments and tactics.



*Is relational and violent aggression equally harmful?* All bullying behaviours are harmful to some extent (Chesney-Lind et al., 2007), but research indicates that they are not uniformly damaging. Violent aggression is consistently shown to be harmful and predictive of developmental maladjustment (Artz, Nicholson, & Magnuson, 2008; Chesney-Lind et al., 2007; Xie, Swift, Cairns & Cairns, 2002). By contrast, relational aggression is associated with harmful emotional consequences, such as isolation and depression, but also normal social developmental behaviours. This includes the development of pro-social behaviours such as; (1) the ability to choose good friends over abusive ones; (2) the desire to not bully others and stand-up for people who are being bullied; (3) the ability to ignore bullying; and (4) an over-all strengthening of character and confidence (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). Not surprisingly, unlike with violent aggression, researchers are unable to conclusively connect relational aggression to long-term negative consequences (Chesney-Lind et al., 2007).

The discrepant impacts of violent and relational aggression are likely due in part to their differential natures. The effectiveness of physical aggression does not depend on the negotiation and intervention of the social network, whereas the effectiveness of relational aggression typically does. For instance, if a child is hit, he or she will feel physical pain in relation to the force behind the strike; regardless of who else is present. If a child is teased, the impact will depend on multiple intersecting variables such as the nature of the teasing, the personal feelings and beliefs of the victim, and the number of other children involved (Xie et al., 2002). This knowledge is important when assessing appropriate prevention and intervention programs, which are discussed later in this thesis.

*Are boys and girls equally aggressive?* Popular media propagate that boys are more violently aggressive and girls are more relationally aggressive. Yet, Chesney-Lind et al.'s (2007) and Artz et al.'s (2008) reviews of the current research on gender and aggression show mixed results. Both reviews found that boys are more physically aggressive than girls, and Artz et al.'s self-report study of 264 middle school students (12 to 15 years-of-age) supports this finding (2008).

Still, study results about relational aggression and gender vary. For example, Chesney-Lind et al. (2007) found that:

... there are a number of studies finding no differences between boys' and girls' perpetration of relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, & McNeilly-Choque, 1998; McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Putallaz, Kupersmidt, Grimes, & DeNero, 1999; Rys & Bear, 1997). There are a few studies concluding that boys are actually more relationally aggressive than girls are (Craig 1998; Hennington, Hughes, Cavell, & Thompson, 1998; Little, Henrich, Jones, & Hawley, 2003; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000). When we shift to the problem of bullying, according to Olweus's (1993) research, boys perpetrate the majority of indirect bullying experienced by girls (see Whitney & Smith, 1993). Note that if Olweus' findings are correct, girls are indirectly victimized more often by boys than by girls; yet this phenomenon rarely makes it into any of the popular books on the topic, which instead showcase girl-on-girl aggression almost exclusively (Chesney-Lind, 2002). (p. 333)

Artz et al. (2008) report the same findings in their literature review. Thus, some studies show no gender differences in use of relational aggression, others show that girls are more relationally aggressive than boys, and some others indicate that boys are more relationally aggressive than girls. Also, there is some evidence suggesting that boys perpetrate the majority of relational aggression experienced by girls. Conversely, Artz et al.'s (2008) study found that girls were more likely to aggress boys than boys were to aggress girls.

These conflicting results reflect numerous methodological problems associated with studying aggression and bullying. For example, the terms aggression and bullying are ambiguous and are often defined differently in studies (Artz et al., 2008; Chesney-Lind et al., 2007). While some studies include both relational and violent acts of aggression in their definition of bullying, others include only violent acts. This is problematic since the definition of key terms determines the data uncovered (Chesney-Lind et al., 2007). Studies counting acts of relational and violent aggression will report more bullying than studies only counting violent acts. Thus, when definitions of key terms differ among studies, so do their results.

Also, results vary based on developmental factors. Since boys and girls develop at different rates, their aggression peaks and changes at different ages (Artz et al., 2008; Chesney-Lind et al., 2007). For example, physical aggression is more typical of both sexes in early childhood (Artz et al., 2008). Yet, “with the development of verbal skills, verbally-aggressive behavior often replaces physical aggression, and since girls as a group tend to acquire verbal skills earlier than boys, girls begin using verbal and indirect aggression sooner than boys” (Artz et al. 2008, p. 269). Eventually, boys and girls tend to grow out of using physical aggression and rely more on verbal skills, which can translate to relational aggression. Thus, studies that ignore developmental differences generate decontextualized findings that boys and girls use drastically different styles of aggression.

Regardless of the causes, inconsistent findings are problematic for policy makers since it is difficult to effectively address a problem that is so highly debated. Also, since politicians and news reporters use crime control for political and financial gain (Carrabine, 2008; Lee, 2007), various findings on the same topic allow them to pick and

choose which studies to cite in support of their goals. Hence, more holistic and longitudinal research is needed on gender differences in bullying and aggression. Hopefully, such an approach will provide a clearer and more consistent picture of the problem.

**Are girls becoming increasingly aggressive?** Darrell Steffensmeier and Jennifer Schwartz (2009) argue that a rise in female involvement in crime and delinquency should result in an increase in their involvement in all forms of crime, including more easily quantifiable offences such as homicides and other serious forms of violent crimes. Contrary to media claims of a rise in girls' aggression, however, Canadian and American studies have shown a decrease in bullying in schools, as well as a decrease in youth violence and crime in general (Currie & Kelly, 2005; Feld, 2009; Males, 2010; Schissel, 2006; Steffensmeier & Schwartz, 2009). For instance, the American *Uniform Crime Reports* (UCR), which measure arrest rates, show that girls' crime statistics have either levelled off or dropped since the mid-1990's, with the exception of assault offences which have increased. The increased assault offences likely reflect the ambiguous nature of assaults rather than actual increases in crime (Steffensmeier & Schwartz, 2009).

Dawn Currie and Deidre Kelly (2005) reported similar youth crime trends in Canada:

Statistics Canada reveals that the annual rate of youths charged with violent crime has dropped for 4 years in a row. While the number of young women charged with minor or moderate assault shows an increase over the past decade, researchers implicate changes in justice policy and charging practices rather than behaviour. For example, as schools move towards policies of 'zero tolerance,' cases that might have been ignored can be brought to court (see Doob & Sprott, 1998). In fact rather than fiction, the rate of female crime dropped during 1999. (p. 1)

American victimization surveys, on the other hand, show that rates of aggravated assault, simple assault, robbery, and rape remained stable for males and females from 1980 to 2003 (Steffensmeier & Schwartz, 2009). This means that youths, both male and female, reported no increase in their involvement in violent crimes during that time. In fact, victimization surveys show:

...sharp declines in rates of assault among both female and male youths since the mid-1990s, but declines have been partly offset by the greater proneness of police to arrest youths—in effect sustaining high arrest levels of youths for assault crimes. (Steffensmeier & Schwartz, 2009, p. 69)

Therefore, this discrepancy may be a result of biases in police arrest practices, as they are prone to arresting youths. That girls' arrest rates for simple assaults are increasing while those of boys' are not, is likely because police target girls more than boys for their use of aggression because it violates traditional standards of femininity (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). Thus, police monitor girlhood more than boyhood, thereby reinforcing and maintaining traditional gender roles and “reasserting patriarchy” (Dragiewicz, 2008, p. 137).

Girls' delinquency is also declining. For instance, Mike Males (2010) shows that tobacco, alcohol, and drug abuse levels, as well as promiscuity, early pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections have declined in frequency among girls over the last few decades, some peaking as long ago as the 1980's (e.g., binge drinking and marijuana/LSD/other psychedelics usage). Additionally, self-report studies of girls' experiences, feelings, and thoughts suggest that girls are doing better than ever before. Males (p. 17) found that, “today, 70% of high school senior girls report being happy with themselves, 86% are happy with their friends, 66% are having fun, and 77% are happy with their lives. These totals are somewhat higher than in the past.”

Girls are happier and are committing fewer offences than they were 20 to 30 years ago. Thus, the “problem” of mean girls is socially constructed rather than based on real threats to young girls by other young girls. Though statistics show bullying is not increasing in either boys or girls, bullying is still a problem that should not be ignored. Bullying in schools is associated with: poor academic performance; low attachment to school; and low commitment to school (Beran, Hughes, & Lupart, 2008). Yet, the directions of the relationships are unclear and may be spurious (i.e., there may be other factors involved) (Payne, Gottfredson, & Kruttschnitt, 2009).

Thus, there is considerable debate about whether delinquency causes problems at school, or if problems at school cause delinquency. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that there are many causes of bullying, and they vary for each individual (Beran et al., 2008). This makes the development of antibullying policies particularly challenging. Media that misrepresent bullying further complicate the development of these policies by overestimating the seriousness of the problem and recommending harmful, reactionary, and overly punitive policies.

### **Girls’ Aggression in the Media and its Repercussions**

Media hype surrounding mean girls is correlated with the creation of problematic antibullying policies at schools which rely too heavily on a law-and-order regime and ignore both gender and racial differences in bullying. As a result, a higher proportion of students are being expelled, suspended, transferred to different schools, or processed by the criminal and youth justice systems than prior to the implementation of these policies (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; DeKeseredy, 2010).

For example, Day, Golench, MacDougall, and Beals-González's (2002) Canadian survey on school antiviolence policies found that Canadian schools tend to overuse suspensions and expulsions as a response to school misbehaviour. Students are likely to be suspended or expelled for misbehaviours such as:

...possession, threat of use, or use of a weapon (prohibited or non-prohibited), violence against person or property, use of alcohol or drugs on school premises, habitual truancy, neglect of duty, tardiness, persistent and wilful disobedience, and smoking. (Day et al., 2002, p. 115)

Clearly, in Canada, the net for misbehaviours that can be penalized by suspension, expulsion, and formal intervention is quite wide. Day et al. (2002) questioned the suitability of suspension and expulsion as a response to school misbehaviour as it casts students out into the world without providing the necessary social supports to avoid future delinquency. Indeed, Elliott Currie (2004) showed that such Darwinian "sink or swim" (p. 14) responses to youth misbehaviour exacerbate the problems that initially lead youths down "the road to 'whatever'" (p. 14). The road to whatever, according to Currie, is "an emotional place in which they [youths] no longer cared about what happened to them and that made trouble not only possible but likely" (2004, p. 14).

In a review of literature on the costs and benefits of suspensions and expulsions, Day et al. wrote:

According to O'Reilly and Sargent (1994) suspension/expulsion serves to (a) remove the offending student from the environment, (b) protect the rights of the other students and staff to a safe school environment, (c) provide a consequence to the misbehaviour, (d) send a message to the students and parents of the serious nature of the behaviour, (e) act as a deterrent to other students for the same misbehaviour, and (f) acknowledge that the student has forfeited his or her right to formal instruction for a period of time or indefinitely. The disadvantages are that suspension/expulsion (a) "fails to provide the student with alternate methods for dealing with situations in the future," (b) "jeopardizes the student's progress in education," (c) offers the chance for the student who dislikes school to avoid it, and (d) "in rare cases may jeopardize members of society at large as an

unsupervised, potentially violent young person roams a neighbourhood" (p. 4). (p. 103)

Certainly, then, the benefits of suspensions and expulsions do not justify the costs. Excluding students from school who misbehave is not enough to change or deter their behaviours, beliefs, cultural goals and circumstances, family situations, and so on. The report recommended more alternative-to-suspension programs with an emphasis on rehabilitation. Currie (2004) suggests developing a "culture of support" (p. 254) for youths through initiatives like: inclusive schools; after school programs; and offering youths a place to go when they leave or are no longer welcome in their homes. DeKeseredy (2007) asserts that such initiatives are, "effective and relatively inexpensive solutions" (p. 200) to youth delinquency and crime.

As previously indicated, zero-tolerance antibullying policies increase the number of bullies being processed within the Canadian youth and criminal justice systems. Formal interventions have the unintended effect of labelling youths as offenders which, as labelling theory suggests, may result in secondary offending by limiting access to legitimate resources to achieve personal and cultural goals (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). Thus, since the purpose of bullying interventions is to reduce bad behaviour, formal interventions that aggravate delinquency and youth crime are not advisable for most youth misbehaviours. Unfortunately, Day et al.'s (2002) report found that 48.8% of Canadian schools using school-based violence prevention policies and programs use the punitive zero-tolerance approach.

A disproportionate number of students who are targeted by zero-tolerance anti-bullying policies are African-American, Latin American, and female (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Feld, 2009). For instance, Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2008) explained that,



“in 2000, African-American students made up 34% of students who were suspended that year; however, they only made up 17.1% of the student body (Maccalair et al. 2000)” (p. 151). Though these are American statistics, they suggest that zero-tolerance antibullying policies, like nearly 50% of Canada’s antibullying policies, are harmful to youths by creating a “schools-to-jails track” for girls, and youths of colour (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008, p. 9).

### **Literature on Violent and Non-Traditional Females in the Press**

The extant research on newspaper representations of female aggression is limited to four categories of aggressive females: (1) women who murder; (2) violent women; (3) “troublesome” females; and (4) violent girls. It is to the first category that I turn to now.

**Women who murder.** Women who murder is a consistently newsworthy topic since it contradicts stereotypical gender expectations of women. British news media, for instance, typically label women murderers as either “bad” (i.e., evil) or “mad” (i.e., sad and crazy). Women are “bad” if their offense was predatory and/or very violent, and if they demonstrate little to no stereotypically feminine qualities such as beauty and meekness. Bad women are often sentenced to life imprisonment. Women are “mad” if their offense was less violent and, unlike their “bad” counterpart, can demonstrate more feminine qualities. These women are sentenced to mental health facilities to “get better” (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002).

Likewise, lesbian women murderers are often presented as the quintessence of female evil (Farr, 2000). Kathryn Farr found that, “portrayals of the perpetrators [were] as embodiments of defeminised and dehumanized female evil for whom chivalry must be forfeited and the most severe punishment delivered” (2000, p. 63). Additionally, lesbian

murderers are targeted by the media and for capital punishment because, among other things, they challenge the male role of the dominant partner in sexual relationships. Some themes identified in this study include: (a) an over-representation of defendants of colour; (b) threats to maleness; (c) defendants were mostly depicted as man-haters, masculine, aggressive, and rage-filled; and (d) the “evil” lesbian (Farr, 2000).

**Violent women.** Violent women are typically reported as unnatural, unusual, and twice as deviant in that they break laws and transgress normative female roles (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Farr, 2000). Grabe, Tager, Lear, and Rauch (2006) found that crimes committed by women were underreported in American news, whereas crimes committed by men were over reported compared to FBI statistics. Yet, women who committed violent crimes or crimes against children were demonized and their crimes were sensationalized. Thus, news reporting is only kind to females who embody traditional femininity.

**“Troublesome” females.** While troublesome females are not problematized exclusively for their use of violence, they can be aggressive and are considered non-traditional and cause social anxiety. Such females engage in binge drinking, are loud, confident, masculine (in appearance and conduct), promiscuous, may be physically and/or relationally aggressive, put off marriage, smoke, and so on.

Carolyn Jackson and Penny Tinkler (2007) compared newspaper representations in the UK of troublesome femininities from the 1920s (i.e., “modern girls”) to the “ladette” of the present. Ladettes are, “according to many press reports, a late twentieth and early twenty-first century phenomenon and a product of women’s increased equality with men in late modern society” (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007, p. 251). Results indicated

that, in the UK, females who contradict stereotypical gender norms are depicted as “bad” and “troublesome,” because they disrupt the “dominant discourses on gender differences and on women as carers” (p. 264). Thus, UK newspapers perpetuate a similar moral panic to that of North America, but UK media are more concerned with non-traditional females rather than violent ones.

Accordingly, in America and the UK, violent and non-traditional females are commonly referred to as bad, wicked, troublesome, crazy, mean, and so on. The contexts, meanings, and motives behind female aggression are typically ignored by journalists in favour of sensationalizing this atypical phenomenon. Finally, racism, heterosexism, patriarchy, and hegemonic femininity have been found to largely contribute to this social anxiety as it encourages the perpetuation of traditional gender roles.

### **Mean Girls in Canadian News**

As previously established, non-traditional females are commonly presented unfavourably in American and British news media. Yet, none of the literature reviewed so far is Canadian. To the best of my knowledge, only two Canadian studies focus on newspaper depictions of aggressive females, and both centre around the murder of Reena Virk.

In Chapter 1 I explained that Virk’s tragic murder on November 14, 1997 inspired much media attention on the topic of girls’ increasing violence. Yasmin Jiwani (1999, 2010) conducted a content analysis of this news attention in the *Vancouver Sun* by tracing news articles and their headlines related to Virk’s murder. She argued that immigrant and refugee girls experience sexism within their own communities. In the dominant

community, however, they often experience sexism and racism, and, although not always overtly, these “isms” are reflected in media.

Jiwani (1999, 2010) found that Vancouver news reporting on Virk’s murder emphasized the increasing violence of teenage girls. This focus erased the underlying racism, patriarchy, and sexism involved in Virk’s murder. For example, one of the arguments leading to Virk’s initial beating was about Reena allegedly stealing one of the girls’ boyfriends. This is, “an example of how the very act of having and keeping a boyfriend is reflective of patriarchal power, a power that is internalized given that it is seen as accruing status to those girls who have boyfriends as opposed to any of the other girls” (Jiwani, 2010, p. 90).

Also, reports ignored the racism implied in the act of burning Virk’s forehead and instead focused on her inability to fit in due to her unfeminine appearance (e.g., she was tall, overweight, and hairy). That her inability to fit in was tied to racist definitions of normative teenage girlhood (i.e., “thin, white, middle class, able, heterosexual, and conforms to accepted notions of female teenage behaviour” [Jiwani, 2010, p. 91]) was almost never mentioned by reporters.

Jiwani’s findings support research showing that news media set a particular agenda in their selection and framing of news topics (e.g., Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Cohen, 1987; Gill, 1989; Kasinsky, 1998; Kupchick & Bracy, 2009). Articles on Virk’s murder minimized or ignored the role of racism and patriarchy in Virk’s murder, focusing instead on the more exciting yet fictitious narrative that girls are becoming increasingly violent. Also, expert witnesses commonly supported this narrative, giving it additional value to readers.

Moral panic theory informed Christie Barron and Dany Lacombe's (2005) broad study of representations of girls' bullying in Canadian news media after Reena Virk's murder. They evaluated newspapers, magazines, and one documentary to assess news depictions of the "nasty girl." Results indicate that, long before Virk's murder (i.e., 1977), there were non-threatening discussions of violence between warring youths, regardless of the seriousness of the offence. However, after Virk's murder, Canadian depictions of girls' violence described girl bullies as bad and getting worse. Expert witnesses were commonly cited to support these simplistic and individualized reports on violent girls. Such descriptions support mean girl moral panic by inflating the risk that girl bullies present to each other and the overall patriarchal structure of Western society.

There was also a shift to much stricter attitudes toward bullying after Virk's murder that sought to punish violent girls and control girls' behaviour. For example, Baron and Lacombe (2005) showed that the Canadian *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA, 2002), which came into effect in April of 2003, makes clear distinctions between what acts are considered nonviolent, violent, and seriously violent. The act ensures that the nature of the charge rather than the circumstances and prognosis of the youth is what largely determines how the adolescent is sentenced. The act, then, is what matters most to the courts, not its contexts, meanings, and motives. Thus, the YCJA targets a wider range of youth than ever before. This is especially true for girls, as it also targets relational aggression which is policed more for girls than boys (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008).

### **Trends in News Coverage of Aggressive Girls**

There are five common manipulative journalistic tools identified in the studies reviewed here that oversimplify news stories and misinform readers. The first manipulative tool is that reporters often omitted discussions about race and context. Instead, they focused on the fictional narrative that girls are becoming increasingly violent and that responses must be quicker and more punitive.

Reporters also typically amplified and misrepresented statistics on youth and female crime; reporting the problem as more severe than it really was. Antifeminist arguments were also commonly used to explain girls' rising aggression. For example, one motivator commonly offered by journalists for girls' aggression is the desire for power through male attention and approval (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Schissel, 2006). Finally, expert witnesses relied on biological, psychological, and familial situations to explain girls' aggression. Such individualized explanations for behaviour ignore the social and structural contexts that affect, and often determine, personal circumstances.

These studies, along with Bernard Schissel's (1997, 2006) work on moral panic in Canada which I discuss in the next chapter, broke Canadian empirical and theoretical ground on this understudied phenomenon. Yet, there is still much room for further research. For instance, Jiwani (1999) focused on articles relating to Virk's murder, making it difficult to generalize her findings to depictions of girl bullies. Conversely, Barron and Lacombe (2005) concentrated primarily on depictions of girls' use of violence, without much discussion of representations of relational aggression.

Also missing was a temporal comparison of journalistic depictions of bullies from immediately before and after Virk's murder. Although Barron and Lacombe compared

their sample to past journalistic attention to girls' violence, the 20 year discrepancy (i.e., 1977 and 1997) cannot show whether there was an immediate shift in news reporting on girls' aggression after Virk's murder. This information is important because, as I explain in Chapter 3, moral panics are characterized by an immediate increase in news attention to the topic of concern after a significant incident (Cohen, 1987). The difference in attitudes towards aggressive girls Barron and Lacombe (2005) identified could be attributed to the passing of time or another single or multiple events. A comparison of news articles on youth aggression immediately before and after Virk's would further support the hypothesis that Virk's murder fuelled a moral panic over aggressive girls in Canadian newspapers.

Finally, the research methodologies used by Jiwani (1999) and Barron and Lacombe (2005) are not clearly described. This negatively affected the transparency of the results. While qualitative research methodologies are difficult to make completely transparent, every attempt should be made to describe and support the rationale for selecting an empirical technique. This enables readers to understand the reliability and validity of a study's findings. Reliability and validity refer to the study's replicability: If a study can be replicated and produce the same results, then the study is both reliable and valid, and by consequence, it is also a good study (Krippendorff, 2004). Thus, future research in this area should clearly explain the research methodologies utilized.

### **Summary**

There is little to no empirical support for the mean girl moral panic in the US, Canada, and the UK. Still, previous research on Canadian newspaper representations of school bullying show that, after Virk's murder, journalists inflated the problem of girls'

bullying and encouraged the creation of harmful antibullying policies and programs.

While this research is important, in that it shows the disproportionate media attention to aggressive girls post Virk, more research on newspaper representations of girl bullies is necessary. My study fills these gaps in the literature. I provide the theoretical framework that guided my study in the next chapter.



### **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

Much research on mean girl hype successfully demonstrates that it is characteristic of a moral panic, yet, there are still unanswered questions about its nature and frequency (Adler & Worrall, 2004; Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010; Schissel, 1997, 2006). To better understand this phenomenon in the Canadian context, I identified the news frames (which I define in Chapter 4) in my sample and compared them to Cohen's theory of moral panic and its criticisms. This chapter provides an overview of Cohen's theory of moral panic; including a brief review of its theoretical roots and the four stages of moral panic. Then, I offer some examples of moral panic in Canada and review the major criticisms of this theory.

#### **Cohen's Theory of Moral Panic**

Cohen (1987) developed the theory of moral panic in his groundbreaking work on the rise and fall of media attention to mods and rockers in 1960's Britain. The mods and rockers were two distinct youth subcultures that media claimed were particularly delinquent and "without parallel in English history" (a newspaper editor as cited in Cohen, 1987, p. 10).

During a moral panic, something first becomes defined as a threat to society (i.e., a "folk devil"). It then gains strong media attention that presents the topic in a stylized and stereotypical fashion. With the support of select moral, academic, and political leaders, the mediated messages become "common sense", often including the implementation of increased punitive responses. Although the heightened media attention typically fades over time, the effects of moral panic can be long lasting and harmful. For

example, since moral panics garner political support, they can lead to the implementation of harmful punitive policies and laws to appease public anxiety.

Although Cohen studied media reactions to a particular topic of moral panic (i.e., the mods and rockers), he argued that the study of moral panic requires researchers to focus not on the object of concern itself, but rather, on the reactions to it and the ensuing social impacts. Objects of moral panic will continue to emerge and re-emerge in future and, while those objects may differ over time, the stages of moral panic will remain somewhat constant and predictable. Thus, identifying those stages is instrumental in combating its use against exaggerated issues of public concern, and the subsequent ill effects (1987). But first, it is important to understand the theoretical bases upon which Cohen designed his theory.

### **Theoretical Roots of Moral Panic Theory**

Cohen's model of moral panic was informed by labelling theory. *Labelling theory* asserts that people are naturally good and that labels like "criminal" and "deviant" are social constructions (Becker, 1963). Labels gain meaning through a complex network of individual beliefs and "social interaction between rule-makers and rule-breakers" (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996, p. 223).

After an initial or *primary* deviant act, individuals who are caught are then labelled deviant or criminal. Negative labels are often internalized and can incur social limitations due to the harmful stigmas attached to the labels. This can result in *secondary* deviancy (i.e., more deviant acts) since the label limits access to legitimate means of achieving personal and cultural goals (Lemert, 1967). Thus, labels are self-fulfilling prophecies in that labelling results in the emulation of the label (i.e., youths labelled

deviant will act deviantly). Here, crime intervention and prevention focus on alternative measures, cultural change, and avoid negative labels where possible (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996, pp. 223-224). Cohen's (1987) theory asserts that deviance and crime are exacerbated by social controls and negative labels, which are propagated through media fuelled moral panic.

### **Stages of Moral Panic**

Another influencing factor to Cohen's theory of moral panic were the stages of social reactions to disasters such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, and nuclear warfare. Disasters and panics are similar in that they both incite social reactions "to something stressful, disturbing or threatening" (Cohen, 1987, p. 22). Cohen's model of moral panic consists of four stages; (1) warning; (2) impact; (3) inventory; and, (4) reaction. Unlike disasters, however, the stages of moral panic are not linear or constant. Instead, they are "circular and amplifying: the impact (of deviance) is followed by a reaction which has the effect of increasing the subsequent warning and impact, setting up a feedback system" (Cohen, p. 24). Thus, at any given time, society could be in any, or multiples, of the four phases of panic, escalating public anxieties.

**The warning phase.** This stage of moral panic is characterized by public worry about conditions that may or may not exist but are perceived as a potential threat. Here, the problem is defined in basic terms, yet exaggerated enough to overcome any doubt that it could upset the current social order. This stage is typical after at least one incident has occurred, and can be observed throughout the cycle of moral panic. Also, warnings become increasingly complicated, formalized, bureaucratic, ritualistic, and "out of proportion to the imminent threat" (Cohen, 1987, p. 146) as time passes.

**The impact phase.** After the predicted event occurs, it is immediately followed by the impact phase; a period of disorganized and alarmist response. Responses vary, but are usually emotional in nature and may include the forming of crowds, mobs, or protestors. During this confusing process, individuals often act in relation to those around them, taking on a group mentality (Cohen, 1987).

**The inventory phase.** This complex phase occurs when the public evaluates what happened and victims determine their conditions. Rumours and ambiguous perceptions about the event become the predominant methods for understanding the situation. Media are largely involved in this process through stylized and stereotypical reporting of events. Cohen identified three categories of mediated inventory practices: “(i) Exaggeration and Distortion; (ii) Prediction; (iii) Symbolization” (1987, p. 31).

*Distortion and exaggeration* are intimately connected since the type of distortion relies on the degree of exaggeration of the seriousness of the incident(s). Seriousness of the problem depends on criteria such as the, “number taking part, the number involved in violence and the amount and effects of any damage or violence” (Cohen, 1987, p. 31). Common media tools for distortion include sensational headlines, melodramatic and amplifying vocabulary (e.g., the use of plurals instead of singulars), and deliberately highlighting elements in the event that are considered interesting and exciting while ignoring or downplaying elements that are not.

*Prediction* is the next important part of the inventory phase. Here, media present the assumption that what has happened will inevitably happen again. Similar to labelling theory’s concept of secondary offending, such predictions are dangerous since they act as self-fulfilling prophecies. Through exaggeration and distortion, media can report

nonevents (i.e., incidents of very little to no social impacts) as the predicted incidents. Thus, predictions almost always result in the reporting of more incidents regardless of whether anything of significance occurred. This escalates public fears about the issue of concern (Cohen, 1987).

The final component of the inventory phase is *symbolization*. The symbolic power of words and images is essential to the mass communication of stereotypes. Simple and seemingly neutral words such as “Pearl Harbour” and “Hiroshima” are used to symbolize particular ideas and emotions. The process of symbolization, as described by Cohen is: “A word (Mod) becomes 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)” (1987, p. 40). Symbolization is also partly made possible by, “dramatized and ritualistic interviews” (Cohen, p. 42) with members of the problem group. Like the prediction component of the inventory phase, this process feeds the exaggeration and distortion process. Thus, symbolization gives new and negative meaning to previously neutral words and images.

Vital to the process of inventory is the manufacturing of *newsworthy* stories (Cohen, 1987). News stories are chosen and prioritized based on their newsworthiness. The stories of highest priority, or newsworthiness, are front page news, such as uncommon yet sensational cases of sexualized acts of aggression (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Carrabine, 2008). Newsworthy stories sell better, making more money for investors, advertisers, and owners. Capitalism is arguably one of the most important reasons why sensational yet statistically uncommon stories (i.e., Virk’s murder, mods and rockers, and mean girls) monopolize journalistic attention over more common and

relevant stories (i.e., racism and boys' violent bullying in schools). Similar to most businesses, financial success is the ultimate goal of news sources, hence, selling their product is essential. Thus, moral panics self-perpetuate: First they are created by the public, claims makers, and media, and then they are reproduced for a period of time due to their newsworthiness and capitalist greed.

**The reaction phase.** Reaction is the final stage of Cohen's moral panic theory. It occurs after the initial impact has passed and people have begun to try to make sense of the event(s) and mediated messages. Discussions no longer center around the original event(s) or actor(s). Instead, panic proponents focus on perceived related issues; mainly remedies and responses such as the, "restoration of the death penalty, arming of policemen, the nature of violence in society" (p. 49), and so on. Reactions are most often alarmist in nature and fall into one of three categories: (a) sensitization; (b) the societal control culture; and (c) exploitation.

*Sensitization* to previously neutral topics typically results from the heightened media attention. Cohen described the effects of sensitization during the panic over mods and rockers as follows: "(i) greater notice taken of signs of hooliganism, (ii) re-classification of such events as being Mods and Rockers activities, (iii) crystallization of the symbolization process started in the inventory" (p. 82).

The *social control culture* refers to changes in official social controls such as policing practices and criminal justice policies (Cohen, 1987). Here, there is a gradual diffusion of heightened controls from the immediate area where the deviant issue made its initial impact. Instead, there is a general escalation of the number, scope, and intensity of control agents on the newly sensitized issue. The new belief system that emerged from

the inventory stage legitimizes increased control of the problem: “If one is dealing with a group which is vicious, destructive, causing the community a financial loss and repudiating its cherished values, then one is justified in responding punitively” (p. 86).

The most frequent opinion statements for social control Cohen identified in news attention to the mods and rockers were punitive: “‘tighten up’, ‘take strong measures’, ‘don’t let it get out of hand’, etc” (p. 87). Here, *innovation* occurs, which is the actual or suggested introduction of new social control methods. Once again, due to the inventory stage, proposed suspensions of certain fundamental human rights are justified to ensure public safety and order.

The final element of the reaction stage is the commercial and ideological *exploitation* of deviant subcultures. Commercial exploitation can be through indirect or direct profits from services by criminal lawyers, court officials, and corrupt policemen, for example. It can also be through marketing schemes for the sale of consumer goods that appeal to stereotypes of current folk-devils (e.g., spiky apparel for punk rockers and black clothing for Goths). Ideological exploitation is typically done by political and religious leaders who denounce the deviant group or person for political gain. Ideological and commercial exploitation also result when the group or person is presented for amusement or ridicule, much like jesters in English royal courts and “freaks” at a circus.

Thus, Cohen’s theory asserts that moral panic is a symptom of capitalism, social controls, and deviant labels. Its stages suggest that it is both self-amplifying and self-perpetuating, and falsely legitimizes tighter and more punitive social controls at the expense of fundamental human rights. This theory has received much support since Cohen first published on the topic in 1972, including in the Canadian context.

### **Moral Panic in Canada**

Schissel (1997, 2006) applied Cohen's theory to Canadian media. He found that Canadian media promote public anxiety on issues related to adolescents, gender, socio-economic status, as well as race and ethnicity. His work was timely as it was first published in May 1997: Only six-months prior to Virk's murder on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1997. Through a comprehensive survey of Canadian newsprint media from 1988 to 1997, Schissel demonstrated that Canada's war on crime was, "quickly becoming a war against youth" (1997, p. 9). Newsprint media assisted in this war by supporting a law-and-order regime whose main goal was to make the YOA more punitive. Critics of the Act claimed that it was, "too lenient, that youth are not deterred because of the soft punishments it allots in favour of excessive human rights provisions, and that the Act releases adolescent dangerous offenders into society to become adult offenders" (p. 9).

However, concern and condemnation for youth delinquency was not equally distributed across all categories of youths. The most consistent and apparent categories of moral concern were: youths from poor families in poor communities; racially-based male youth gangs and groups mostly consisting of recent immigrants or Canadian Aboriginals; youths from working or single mother families; as well as delinquent girls. Schissel argued that, through media depictions, class and race became synonymous with gang criminality, and class and gender became tantamount to criminogenic families.

Schissel also found that news media covering girls' delinquency claimed that females were becoming increasingly violent and masculinised. Media coverage blamed women's liberation for this change in female behaviour, promoting the concept of, "strong women as a social evil" (Schissel, 1997, p. 57). Strong women in the media such



as television actress Rosanne Barr and rock star Courtney Love were depicted as leaders of this new generation of females, “driven by testosterone” (*Alberta Report*, as cited in Schissel, 1997, p. 55). Therefore, there is much evidence that moral panics are promoted by Canadian media. However, like with all theories, there are some important criticisms to consider.

### **Criticisms of Moral Panic Theory**

There are many criticisms of moral panic theory that point to its need to be reformed. This section of the chapter is a review of these criticisms, and provides examples of moral panics that arguably do not fit the traditional theory. Moral panic theory does not take into account a number of important variables. Here, I discuss how:

- (a) Appropriate levels of concern are difficult to define;
- (b) Moral panics can be about real social ills, such as paedophilia;
- (c) Misinformation propagated through panics originate from many sources, not just popular media;
- (d) Modern media is less likely to dichotomize concepts like “deviant” and “normal”;
- (e) Many topics of panic are not new or fleeting, but have simply re-emerged in the public eye;
- (f) Reactions to moral panics are not exclusively damaging. They can also legitimize, glamorize, and profit the target of concern; and,
- (g) Ideas propagated through moral panics are not universally accepted.

A major claim of moral panic theory is that media exaggerate the problem and create disproportionate public concern compared to the actual threat. This claim has inspired much criticism for one very important reason: How do you define appropriate levels of social concern (Carrabine, 2008; Jewkes, 2004)? Although heightened media

attention to a problem amplifies perceptions of its prevalence, it is sometimes difficult to say whether the level of concern brought on by this journalistic focus is unjustified.

For example, Yvonne Jewkes (2004) explained that anxiety over, and media attention to, paedophilia rose in Britain in 1996 after a series of sexually motivated child murders in Belgium. Like with all moral panics, paedophilia was fiercely condemned, othered, and demonized, but Jewkes questions whether this anxiety was unfounded considering the very real danger of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Since paedophilia is in fact very damaging to its young victims, should the public not be concerned? This brings into question the term “moral panic” which implies that public reactions to a problem are unjustified (Jewkes). Since there are some justified moral panics, such as concerns about paedophilia, should the title be adjusted to account for this variation of public moral anxiety?

Jewkes (2004) also argues that media may not be the only source of the misinformation propagated through moral panics. For example, journalists portray a singular and inaccurate picture of the archetypal paedophile: “A rather grubby, inadequate loner; a misfit who is not ‘one of us’ (p. 96). This perpetuates the notion that paedophiles are unlike the normal population, they are easily spotted due to their unkempt appearance, and that sexual predators are strangers rather than family and close friends, even though research shows family and friends are the most common sex offenders (p. 97). While this picture of paedophiles is inaccurate, it is consistent with their characterization in other mediums, including British government issued sex offender orders and information pamphlets. Thus, it is difficult to say which medium is responsible for false mediated messages. This brings to question another central notion of

moral panic theory: Is media the source of the misinformation it feeds its consumers, or does it simply reinforce popular misconceptions? However, regardless of the source of the misinformation, media's active role in propagating and perpetuating moral panic cannot be ignored.

Cohen's theory also asserts that moral panics dichotomize "deviant" groups from "normal" ones. Eamonn Carrabine (2008) argues, however, that modern cosmopolitan cities like Toronto and New York are less likely to embrace such binary labels since diversity encourages multiculturalism and acceptance. As such, moral panics that strictly dichotomize between good and bad are, theoretically, less appealing to modern society than they may have been when Cohen first devised his theory in 1972. If true, media should be less likely to utilize this manipulative tool and adaptations of moral panic theory should account for this.

Another criticism of Cohen's theory is that, instead of being strictly anomalous and new, topics of moral panic often reflect long-term social concerns. Public anxieties tend to re-emerge as a pressing social issue after one or more extreme yet atypical incidences receive heightened journalistic attention (Jewkes, 2004). Mean girl moral panic exemplifies this phenomenon since concern over female aggression is a common symptom of patriarchy. Also, this concern originates from the beginning of the feminist movement and reflects common arguments of sex-symmetry in violence and the fall of traditional femininity (DeKeseredy, 2011/2010; Dragiewicz, 2011; Gelsthorpe & Morris, 1988). Thus, moral panic theory should take into account that panics can reflect enduring social anxieties, not just new ones.

Moreover, moral panics are not universally accepted as the traditional theory asserts. For example, they are often contested by interest groups and pressure groups who respond to the demonization of social issues and groups targeted by mediated panic (Carrabine, 2008; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Through mediated responses, the contesting groups provide much needed balance to the messages consumed by the public. In a related criticism, traditional moral panic theory posits that politicians and media use moral panic as a tool for political and financial gain. However, Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton (1995) argue that, because the concept of moral panic is publicly known, groups who use it are now facing public criticisms, which may also help curb the affects of moral panic.

Additionally, topics of moral panic are a common marketing tool (Carrabine, 2008). While this concept was included in Cohen's original theory as exploitation, his concern was that this is abnormal and exploits panic targeted groups. While this is true, these marketing ploys also serve to legitimize, glamorize, and can financially profit the group or person of concern (Carrabine, 2008; Jewkes, 2004). In effect, media promote mixed messages through moral panics: One perspective is negative (typically news sources that demonize the issue of concern), while the other side is positive (most often vendors who legitimize the issue to improve sales).

For example, traditional moral panic theory assumes that youth subcultures, which are the most common topic of social anxiety, are, "driven to violence as a result of feeling marginalized from the mass consumer culture" (Jewkes, 2004, p. 78). Thus, moral panic leads to marginalization of the targeted group, which causes their increased use of aggression. Jewkes argued that this victimization hypothesis embedded in moral panic

theory ignores the possibility that youths targeted for panic, such as the mods and rockers, misbehaved as a result of their rising optimism and wealth. The rising popularity of youth fashions and cultures due to increased media attention likely offered the mods and rockers more opportunities for success than the original panic theory recognizes.

### **Summary**

Cohen's theory of moral panic can be condensed to this simple idea: "The tendency [of media] is ... to deal with any problem, first by simplifying its causes, second by stigmatizing those involved, third by whipping up public feeling and fourth by stamping hard on it from above [through punitive policies]" (Hall, 1978, p. 34).

Considering the findings of Schissel (1997, 2006), Jiwani (1999, 2010) and Barron and Lacombe (2005), there is strong evidence that public anxiety over girls' aggression is indeed a Canadian problem.

Nonetheless, critics argue that Cohen's theory of moral panic is incomplete since it misses numerous important variables. Despite many criticisms, no modern adaptation of moral panic theory addressing these criticisms exists. Due to time constraints, it is outside the scope of this thesis to provide such a theory. However, I present a number of important findings in Chapter 6 that have implications for future theory and policy development, as well as future research. In the following chapter, I explain the methods utilized in my study.

## Chapter 4: Methods

I used mixed methods to investigate whether, and to what extent, news responses to Virk's murder could be characterized as fuelling a moral panic about girls' bullying. First, I used descriptive statistics (i.e., basic statistics) to empirically document the frequency of media attention to bullying preceding and following Virk's murder. Then, I utilized frame analysis to compare reporting on bullying over time, with special attention to girls' bullying.

### Sample Selection

Sample selection for this study was theoretically driven. David Altheide (2009) argues that print news media may be the most effective form of media in promoting fear of crime, and as such, are more likely and able to promote moral panic than televised news reports. This is because newspapers offer more opportunities for diverse perspectives through sections for readers' opinions, reviews, and feature stories. Televised news reports, by contrast, have short time frames in which to convey select messages (Altheide, 2009).

Additionally, resonance theory asserts that local newspapers are preferable to national newspapers for research on moral panic in newspapers. According to this theory, people can more easily associate local crime as a threat to their safety than crime committed elsewhere (i.e., national or international) (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980). Research on fear of crime supports this theory, showing that local news media have the most significant effect on fear of crime than any form of news media (e.g., Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; Jewkes, 2004; Sacco, 2006).

Accordingly, I selected two local newspapers for this study: *The Toronto Sun* [*The Sun*] and *The Toronto Star* [*The Star*]. These newspapers were chosen due to their different political alignments and newspaper styles. *The Sun* is a conservative tabloid-style newspaper, whereas *The Star* is a liberal broadsheet-style newspaper. For example, in an article in *The Sun* on November 3, 1998 (p. 15), reporter Blizzard promoted the politics of progressive conservative and former Attorney General Charles Harnick and condemned those of liberal Deputy Prime Minister Anne McClellan. By contrast, Landsberg – reporter to *The Star* – condemned progressive conservative and former Premier of Canada Mike Harris for his government’s, “sickeningly familiar anti-intellectualism” (1998, May 9, p. L1). Also in *The Star*, on October 27, 1998 reporter Contenta wrote an article expressing concern that Montreal’s liberal party would lose the coming election: “Charest’s Liberals in trouble, new poll says: Confirms steady slide in support” (p. A1). These references illustrate each newspaper’s broad political orientation.

I collected news articles that ran from May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1997, six-months prior to Virk’s murder, until November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998, one year after her murder. I located the articles using *LexisNexis*, a comprehensive, fully indexed news database. I searched for articles which included the terms: bully; bullying; youth violence; youth aggression; boys; girls; youth gangs; gangs; Reena Virk; and violent kids in each newspaper. This approach yielded 126 results.

I conducted open coding, which is the process where data are broken down conceptually and grouped under categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), on the 126 articles in the sample. Four primary categories were derived from open coding: articles about boy bullying; articles about girl bullying; articles about gender neutral bullying; and articles

about policy change or programs related to bullying. To test moral panic theory, I also divided the articles into three six-month periods: (1) May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1997 – Nov. 13<sup>th</sup>, 1997; (2) Nov. 14<sup>th</sup>, 1997 – May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1998; and finally, (3) May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998 – Nov. 13<sup>th</sup>, 1998. Descriptive statistics for all 126 articles are included below in the findings.

Following the collection of descriptive statistics, I further narrowed the sample to focus on the articles on girls' bullying and program and policy change. This focus enabled the identification of patterns in discussions of girls' bullying, rather than the particular responses to Virk's murder, which have already been studied<sup>2</sup>. Thus, I omitted articles directly related to the Virk case, boy bullying, and gender neutral bullying from further analysis. However, since no articles on girls' bullying were found prior to Virk's murder, I analyzed articles on gender neutral bullying and those related to program and policy change during that time period. This yielded 56 articles (44% of 126): 20% (11) were published before Virk's murder and 80% (45) were published during the year after. From the remaining eligible articles, I selected 30 of the largest for analysis. I selected this subsample based on the length of the article and the presence of at least three elements of a news frame.

### **Analysis**

Frame analysis is a form of qualitative analysis originating from communication studies, and I used it to identify the nature of reporting on girls' bullying in the sample. Robert Entman (1993) asserts that news media frame stories in a specific way that set and promote particular agendas. Media frames "*select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment*

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<sup>2</sup> See Jiwani (1999) for an analysis of Canadian news reporting on Virk's murder.



*recommendation* for the item described” (emphasis in original, Entman, 1993, p. 52). In short, frame analysis enables the identification and analysis of the agendas set through media such as newspapers, television, and film.

A news frame does four things:

- (1) *Define the problem*: Determine what a causal agent is doing and with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms on common cultural values.
- (2) *Diagnose causes*: Identify the force(s) causing or creating the problem.
- (3) *Make moral judgments*: Morally evaluate causal agents and their effects.
- (4) *Suggest remedies*: Offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

All four parts are not necessarily present in any single article. However, frames may cohere across multiple articles.

Frame analysis is compatible with research on moral panics for many reasons. The first reason is that, at its core, a moral panic is a news frame. Panics promote the agenda of fear and punishment and they increase the salience of their messages through repeated and decontextualized news coverage. They also address the four parts of a frame, in that a moral panic: defines the problem; diagnoses the cause(s); makes moral judgements; and suggests remedies (Cohen, 1987).

Additionally, this method allowed me to reduce the opportunity for bias toward the identification of moral panic in my sample. Instead of looking for statements that fit the traditional model of moral panic and risking a self-fulfilling prophesy (much like moral panic itself), I identified the frames, and their elements, as they appeared in the articles. Thus, the results I present in Chapter 5 represent the extant frames, and the

findings I analyze in Chapter 6 assess whether, and to what extent, the frames embody mean girl moral panic.

Additionally, frame analysis allowed me to identify multiple frames on bullying in the sample. This was essential since moral panic theory assumes that the nature of reporting will change after a major incident (Cohen, 1987). Thus, if Virk's murder inspired moral panic, there should be at least two frames in the sample: One news frame before her murder and a different one after it. If there is only one news frame in the sample, there will be little support for my hypothesis that Toronto newspapers promoted mean girl moral panic after Virk's murder.

Another benefit of employing frame analysis is that it allowed me to test some of the criticisms of moral panic theory; especially the balancing frame criticism. As previously stated, the balancing frame criticism was that moral panics often inspire opposing journalistic responses that provide a balancing effect to articles promoting moral panic (Jewkes, 2004). If true, there will be at least two equally prominent news frames in the sample following Virk's murder: One frame promoting panic and the other opposing it. If there is only one news frame after her murder, or the panic frame is more prominent than the balancing frame, then there will be little to no support for that criticism.

### **Summary**

This study utilized mixed methods to uncover whether Virk's murder fuelled a media generated moral panic in two local Toronto newspapers. I used quantitative methods to uncover the frequency of media attention to bullying over time: six-months before Virk's murder compared to 12-months after. To examine the sample qualitatively,

reduce bias, and broaden the scope of my study, I utilized frame analysis. Frames were compared across the three six-month time periods to uncover whether the nature of reporting changed over time. I also compared frames by newspapers to see whether newspaper style and political alignment affected the news frames. I provide the results of my study in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Results

My study aimed to uncover whether, and to what extent, Virk's murder fuelled a mediated moral panic over mean girls in two Toronto newspapers. The descriptive statistics showed that news attention to youth bullying drastically changed after Virk's murder. As predicted, before her murder, there were few articles on the topic of youth bullying. After her murder, I found a strong increase in news attention to youth bullying – particularly girl-on-girl bullying – that faded over the year.

Through frame analysis, I found three frames in my sample. As expected, there was one bullying frame before Virk's murder; the realistic balancing frame. This frame presented youth bullying as a moderate social problem, did not specify either gender as a bigger problem, and promoted social programs involving youth and community members.

I found two other frames after Virk's murder. The mean girls frame presented girls' aggression as a major social problem and recommended harsher penalties for violent youth and repeat young offenders. The realistic balancing frame, by contrast, was a response to the first frame, and asserted that anxiety over girls' aggression is empirically unsupported and distracts from more harmful social problems. Proponents of this frame recommended that interventions focus on social change and treatment programs rather than punishment and social exclusion.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to the detailed description of my results. First, I provide the results of my quantitative analysis. Then, I present the three news frames in my sample. In combination, there is much support for my hypothesis that Virk's murder helped to fuel a media generated moral panic in two Toronto newspapers.

### Descriptive Statistics

In Chapter 4, I explained that *LexisNexis* identified 126 articles relating to youth bullying and violence in *The Star* and *The Sun* between May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1997 and November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998. Fifty-nine percent (74) of the 126 articles were from *The Star*, and 41% (52) of the articles were from *The Sun*. For easier viewing and analysis, I divided the sample into three tables based on date of publication. Table 1 includes articles found between May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1997 and November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1997. Table 2 includes articles found between November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1997 and May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1998. Finally, Table 3 includes articles found between May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998 and November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1998. Each table is organized by newspaper source (i.e., *The Sun* and *The Star*) and article topic (i.e., boys' bullying [Boys], girls' bullying [Girls], gender neutral youth bullying [Neutral], and youth justice policies and programs [Policy]).

**Table 1**

*Articles Six-Months before Virk's Murder*

	Boys	Girls	Neutral	Policy	Totals:
<i>The Sun</i>	3	0	3	1	7
<i>The Star</i>	1	0	3	4	8
Totals:	4	0	6	5	15

Table 1 demonstrates that only 12% (15) of the total 126 articles were found prior to Virk's murder. Of the 15 articles, there were none on the topic of girls' bullying. The mode (i.e., the variable with the highest frequency) of this time period constituted articles using gender neutral language when describing bullying (40% or six).

**Table 2***Articles Six-Months Immediately after Virk's Murder*

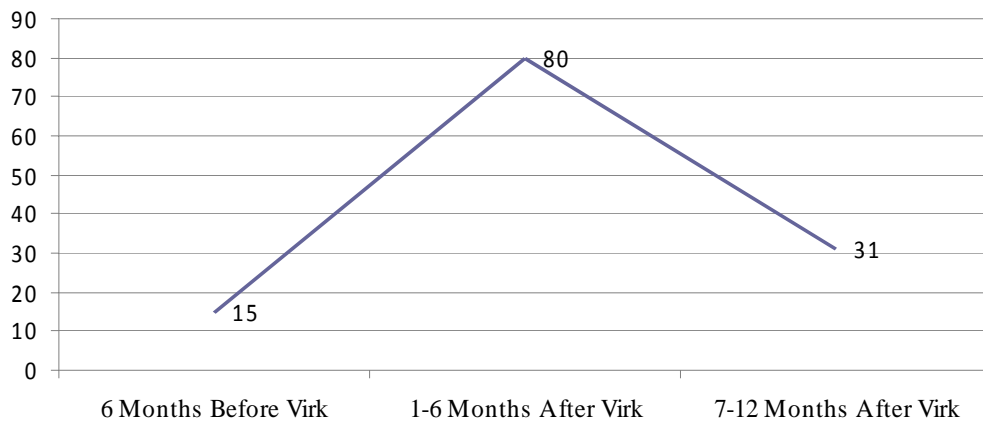
	Boys	Girls	Neutral	Policy	Totals:
<i>The Sun</i>	6	21	6	2	35
<i>The Star</i>	6	22	10	7	45
Totals:	12	43	16	9	80

Table 2 shows that 63% (80) of the total articles were found in the six-months immediately following Virk's murder. Additionally, 54% (43) of the 80 articles were on girls' bullying, and girls' bullying was the mode of this time period.

**Table 3***Articles Seven- to 12-Months after Virk's Murder*

	Boys	Girls	Neutral	Policy	Totals:
<i>The Sun</i>	1	4	3	2	10
<i>The Star</i>	4	3	9	5	21
Totals:	5	7	12	7	31

Finally, Table 3 shows that 25% (31) of the total articles were found seven- to 12-months after Virk's murder. Also, 45% (14) of the articles during this time period were on girls' bullying (seven) and youth justice policies (seven). The mode of this time period was articles using gender neutral language when describing bullying (39% or 12).

**Figure 1***Frequency of Bullying News Articles Over 18-Months*

Although these descriptive statistics are only shallow indicators of the content of each article, Figure 1 demonstrates a significant shift in the frequency of reporting on bullying after Virk's murder. There was a 51% increase in articles on bullying from the six-months before Virk's murder to the six-months following it. Articles on bullying increased more than fivefold from before Virk's murder (15) to the six-months following it (80). In the seven- to 12-months after Virk's murder, there was a 49% decrease in news attention to youth bullying, with a total of 31 articles on bullying. Yet, this number is still more than two-times the amount of articles found in the six-months prior to Virk's murder (15).

The time period before Virk's murder had no articles on girls' bullying, while girls' bullying was the most frequent youth bullying topic during the six-months following Virk's murder (45). The reduced number of articles on girls' bullying in the seven- to 12-month period (seven) compared to the one- to six-month period (45) following Virk's murder is consistent with patterns of moral panic as described by Cohen (1987). Likewise, the shift in focus from the problem (i.e., girls' bullying) to remedies

(i.e., policies and programs) over the year following Virk's murder is consistent with the reaction phase of Cohen's theory.

Even after omitting articles directly about the Virk case, the descriptive statistics indicate that there was a significant change in the frequency and nature of reporting on bullying after Virk's murder. This change was characterized by a shift from gender neutral language to a strong emphasis on girls' bullying. The following section will address the nature of the news coverage over the three time periods in further detail.

### News Frames of Girl Bullies in Toronto Newspapers

**Table 4**

*30 Article Subsample of Total Articles on Youth Bullying*

	6-Months Before			1-6 Months After			7-12 Months After		
	Neutral	Policy	Totals:	Girls	Policy	Totals:	Girls	Policy	Totals:
<i>The Sun</i>	2	1	3	6	1	7	2	2	4
<i>The Star</i>	2	2	4	6	3	9	1	2	3
Totals:	4	3	7	12	4	16	3	4	7

Total = 30

*The Sun* = 14

*The Star* = 16

Frame analysis was applied to a subsample of 30 articles (see Table 4). Sixteen (53%) articles were selected from *The Star* and 14 (47%) articles were chosen from *The Sun*. As previously mentioned, the subsample was selected based on two key factors. The first factor was article size: Larger articles were selected over shorter articles. The second factor was that each article must address at least three of the four elements of a news frame (i.e., define the problem, diagnose the cause, make moral judgements, and recommend remedies).

**Table 5**



*News Frames by Time Period, Newspaper, and Frequency*

	6-Months Before		1-6 Months After		7-12 Months After	
	Major	Minor	Major	Minor	Major	Minor
The Sun	OGN	N/A	MG	N/A	MG	N/A
The Star	OGN	N/A	MG	RB	MG	N/A

I found two primary frames in both newspapers: (1) the optimistic gender neutral frame (OGN); and (2) the mean girls frame (MG). Additionally, I found one other prominent frame in *The Star* only; the realistic balancing frame (RB). Table 5 shows where each frame was found by time period, newspaper, and frequency. Frequency is represented in terms of *major* and *minor* frames. Major frames were found most frequently, while minor frames were found infrequently. Additionally, major frames were more commonly authored by staff news reporters and were placed in a priority position in the newspaper. As I explained in Chapter 3, the highest priority position in a newspaper is the front page and the lowest is the back pages. Articles using minor frames were authored by columnists and opinion piece authors and did not receive a priority position in the newspaper.

### **The Optimistic Gender Neutral Frame**

This was the major and only news frame found in *The Sun* and *The Star* before Virk's murder. Although it was the only frame used prior to Virk's murder, it was virtually absent afterward. As shown below, this news frame is characterized by gender neutral language and an optimistic perspective on bullying. This frame was optimistic for a number of reasons, but primarily since youths were not only seen as part of the cause of bullying, but also as the major contributors to the solution through social programs.

**The problem.** This frame most often identified violence in schools as the problem rather than bullying. Reporters claimed youth violence was increasing, but not in terms of

numbers. Instead, a minority of younger youths were described as becoming more violent at younger ages than they were in the past. For example, the following quotation by Bauni Mackay, president of the Albertan Teacher's Association, illustrates this point: "The minority of youth who are involved in violence are becoming younger, the violence is more intense and more serious weapons are involved" (n.a., *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 11, p. G3). Older youths were described as less violent but more relationally aggressive, especially girls: "While physical aggression declines in both sexes with age, indirect aggression increases, the study found ... Boys are more physically aggressive than girls, but girls use 'indirect aggression' ..." (Carey, *The Star*, 1997, June 16, p. A3). In other words, the rate of bullying prevalence remained the same, but the ages of youth who use violence has lowered (e.g., eight-year-olds instead of 16-year-olds) and the violence has become more severe.

Journalists supporting this frame often described youth violence using gender neutral language. For example, Gladman wrote: "Green is only one of numerous kids (aged 14-17) in Montreal and Toronto who have altered their lives through LOVE, a community-based outreach program geared to teaching troubled kids how to express themselves through creative means" (*The Sun*, 1997, May 18, p. 42). Although gender neutral language was used most often in this frame, when the gender of an offender was identified, the offenders were predominantly male.

Consistent with Schissel's (1997, 2006) findings, youth gang violence was also identified as a major problem in this news frame. Authors supporting this frame claimed that common youth gang offences include: taxing (i.e., extortion); causing youth suicides; intimidation; armed robbery; and uttering threats. For instance: "4 teen suicides spark

extortion complaints: Police downplay link to ‘taxing’ by youth gangs” (Headline, n.a., *The Star*, 1997, Oct. 2, p. A6). This headline implies that youth gangs played a larger part than police acknowledged. However, Inspector Yves Morency of the Longueuil police said that the suicide notes of the deceased teens blamed other stressors for their suicides: “One mentioned breaking up with his girlfriend. Another said he missed a friend who had committed suicide earlier” (*The Star*, Oct. 2, 1997, p. A6). This contradiction suggests that the article and its headline were written to inflate the involvement of youth gangs in these events.

**The causes.** Macro-level (i.e., large scale such as social or structural) and micro-level (i.e., small or individual scale) causes were identified in this news frame. Some macro-level causes included social pressures such as the pressure to look a certain way (e.g., thin, pretty, white, blonde, and so on) and to attain a middle-class socio-economic standard. For example, Cairns noted that: “I became choked with emotion when I read about Kelly Yeomans. Her only sin was being fat. And because of that, cruel teenagers at her school poured salt in her lunch and dumped her clothes in the garbage” (*The Sun*, 1997, Oct. 14, p. 12). Some micro-level causes included substance abuse, not having learned pro-social behaviours, bad friends and/or parents, inherent meanness or heartlessness, and other stressors. For instance, Dr. Vicki Mather, the project director for an Albertan teachers’ association in 1997, said:

There’s a lot of stress in our society that wasn’t there in past generations. Many families are struggling to deal with that stress and for the most part are doing exceptionally well. But there’s no reason we can’t provide everyone with resources to help them do a better job. (n.a., *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 11, p. G3)

**The moral judgments.** Proponents of this frame were sympathetic to troubled youth and struggling parents. They also deemphasized the seriousness of the youth

violence problem. Victims were often depicted as completely innocent while offenders were generally presented as troubled youth needing guidance and support.

Additionally, incidents of youth violence were sometimes depicted as accidental or unintended. For example, in an article outlining the events and motivations behind an incident of teen male bullying that led to a boy's death, the author said: "Shaun was mortally wounded – a victim of a freakish punch, thrown in a fracas everyone believed was folly from the start" (Esper, *The Sun*, 1997, July 26, p. 21). Thus, regardless of the event's serious consequences, the final killing act was described as accidental rather than a premeditated act of hate. The fight itself was described as foolish. *The Sun's* positive response to this incident implies an optimistic perspective on youth bullying.

**The remedies.** Solutions proposed in this frame revolved around social programs that teach troubled youth alternatives to violence and encourage more social and parental supports. For example: "Alberta is taking aim at violence in schools: Project aims to include conflict resolution in curriculum" (n.a., *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 11, p. G3). "Kids helping kids" was a popular slogan in this news frame, as exemplified by Dana Zosky, the creator of a Canadian youth outreach program for violent youth called *Leave Out Violence* (LOVE). Below, Zosky expresses her philosophy on responding to youth violence:

'When a young kid has been a member of a gang or a victim of violence himself, he can tell other kids what it's really like. It's much more effective coming from kids themselves than social workers, teachers or policemen.' (as cited in Gladman, *The Sun*, 1997, May 16, p. 42)

This program, along with others, also received attention in *The Star*: "L.O.V.E. is the difference: Young people working together learn writing, photography and drama in a bid to live free of violence" (Headline, Mawhinney, 1997, May 20, p. E1). Another

violence prevention program known as *Second Step* was described as effective in decreasing violence in a sample of American and Canadian youths. This program teaches preschool children to ninth graders about empathy, problem-solving, and anger management (n.a., *The Star*, 1997, May 31, p. L13).

In addition to programs for kids, journalists adopting this frame recommended stronger police presence to deter future violence: “Metro Police Chief David Boothby said a police presence in schools is an important part of the Safe School Network, and he wishes it could be greater” (Quinn, *The Star*, 1997, May 14, p. A7). Interventions and treatment programs were recommended for youths with substance abuse problems.

Although not technically a remedy, authors in this frame argued that violence decreases with time: “Kids less violent with age, study shows” (Headline, Carey, *The Star*, 1997, June 16, p. A3). Thus, journalists were cognisant that violence in adolescence does not necessarily result in adult violence or crime. As a result, the problem of youth violence does not seem so severe since the problem is a normal part of growing up and it fades with age. Social change was also suggested, such as promoting increased tolerance of diversity: “Isn’t it time we learned to have a heart for the fat kids – and fat adults – among us, to accept them as they are?” (Cairns, *The Sun*, 1997, Oct. 14, p. 12). Here, youth violence is a problem in need of positive social responses: “I would rather see (kids) graduate from school than from one court system to another... A preventative approach to violence involving the community is powerful” (Provincial Court Judge Brian Stevenson, as cited in n.a., *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 11, G3).

### **The Mean Girls Frame**

As shown in Table 5 (see pg. 49), the mean girls frame was the only bullying frame found in *The Sun*, and the major bullying frame found in *The Star*, after Virk's murder. This frame was frequently adopted by official news reporters for both newspapers, though some special columnists and opinion piece authors utilized this frame as well. This frame reported girls' bullying and aggression as a major social problem requiring immediate punitive remedies.

**The problem.** Girls' bullying, violence, and gang membership were the major problems in this news frame. These problems were described as increasing at an exponential rate, and faster than that of boys: "Hence the headlines, and dramatic language, like this from the Canadian Press: 'The number of females charged with violent crime has been increasing twice as fast over the last decade as the number of males.' Yikes. You go girls" (Williamson, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, July 25, p. 3). The contexts of the discrepancies between boys' and girls' violent crime rates (e.g., differences in policing practices of boy offenders and girl offenders) were not provided.

These results are similar to those of Schissel (1997, 2006), Jiwani (1999), and Barron and Lacombe (2005), in that girls' bullying and violence were major journalistic concerns post Virk's murder. However, although Schissel (2006) found that youth gangs were a popular topic at that time, he did not find a focus on girls. Instead, youth gang discussions more typically referred to ethnic boys or "kids" in general: "Ultimately, 'gang' becomes a racist code word in the media to refer to Aboriginal and immigrant kids" (Schissel, 2006, p. 95). Thus, Canadian journalistic concern over girls' gang involvement is a novel discovery.

Contrary to the optimistic gender neutral frame, older youths were described as committing more offences than younger youths (see Harris, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, May 10, p. 2). Girls' misbehaviour was depicted as more common, vindictive, relationally aggressive, and "pettier" than boys' misbehaviour, regardless of the context of the act or the extent of the damage caused. For example, in a two-page article in *The Sun* entitled, "Sabrina packs one mean right hook...: Ruthless violence by girls stuns us – but it's neither new nor rare", Mandel described girls' bullying thusly:

Being too fat, being too skinny, too smart, too nerdy, too poor without the right name-brand clothes or worse, too attractive to the opposite sex – any such deemed transgression could lead to ostracization. And for an adolescent girl, there is nothing worse than being left out of the group; nothing more empowering than being in one. (1997, Nov. 30, p. 40)

Journalists utilizing this frame claimed that girls are predominantly relationally aggressive, yet, they also argued that girls were increasingly using violence to express their aggression. They also used atypical examples of female offenders such as the girls involved in Virk's murder and Canadian serial killer Karla Homolka to support this claim:

That standard brand of female cruelty is still playing out every day in the schoolyard. What has changed is the willingness of some to take it further and act out their aggression physically. And that willingness is still catching many off guard...That young women can be vicious should hardly be news. Just the name Karla Homolka should suffice. (Mandel, *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 30, p. 40)

Misrepresenting atypical events and offenders such as Homolka as common is a manipulative journalistic tool and is effective in fuelling moral panic (Cohen, 1987; Schissel, 1997, 2006).

Also, this news frame reported that Toronto girl gangs were waging a "reign of terror" on young Torontonians: "Police bust 'gang' of 15-year-old girls: Teens accused of

conducting a ‘reign of terror’ on Jarvis student” (Headline, Duncanson & Rankin, *The Star*, 1998, Jan. 22, p. A1). One quotation from a Metro Police Sergeant likened girls’ involvement in gang violence to an illegal cock fight;

“What really upsets me are the situations where hundreds of girls are involved or cheering it [a fight] on. It reminds me of an illegal cock fight where you have the two roosters in the pen and everybody’s passing around the money and cheering them on while they’re biting each other to death.” (Sgt. John Muise as cited in Mandel, *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 30, p. 40)

While in reality, boys are involved in more gang violence than girls, here, girls are dehumanized for this behaviour in a way that boys are not. This is consistent with studies showing that females who transgress gender roles are dehumanized through labels such as “crazy” and “mad” by media (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010).

To support allegations that gangs, particularly girl gangs, were a rising problem in Toronto, *The Star* conducted a study on youth gangs and aggression in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The study consisted of a review of historical youth gang incidences in Canada, a survey, and anecdotes from carefully selected experts, victims, and offenders. *The Star* published approximately 7 articles from this study, starting October 24<sup>th</sup> 1998 and ending November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

Michelle Shephard – education reporter to *The Star* and the main author of this series – wrote: “The Star survey clearly illustrates that one of the biggest problems police and school authorities face every day: Silence” (1998, Oct. 24, p. A1). Shephard claimed that intimidation through a “reign of terror” is the best, most effective, and most commonly used tool by youth gangs in the GTA. Fear causes victims to remain silent about abuse, so youths under report incidents of bullying. Shephard argued that under



reporting due to fear was the real reason why statistics on youth aggression, particularly girls' aggression, are so low.

Although only five of the alleged 180 city gangs identified in this study were purely girl gangs, the majority of the articles in this special report had a portion devoted to showing that girls are more aggressive than boys:

Girls fight too – often more fiercely than their male counterparts. At least five of the 180 gang identified by police are strictly female, including the Ghetto Girls, Lady Crew and the Rucus Girls. Many have both male and female members. (Shephard, *The Star*, 1998, Oct. 24, p. A18).

“Oh they're killers. They're worse than us. I wouldn't go near them,” he says, waving his hands as he talks. “Girl gangs are... crazy. I don't go near those ones, they'd kill me. They grab rocks and put them (in their) purses and when someone comes they'll crack 'em with it. They also carry those bandanas with locks on the bottom of them. I don't go near them.” (male North York Catholic school student as cited in Shephard, *The Star*, 1998, Oct. 24, p. A18)

Shephard also cited Toronto Constable Wendy Gales who claimed that; “During the last year, definitely the most violent-type crimes are where the female gang members have been suspects” (Shephard, *The Star*, 1998, Oct. 24, p. A18).

Another concern in this news frame was weapons in schools;

According to Guest [Constable of Toronto police's community response unit], weapons like pipes, baseball bats, knives and pool balls in socks are relatively common in schools, whether they are located downtown or in the suburbs. And there are always guns. (Pingue, *The Star*, 1998, Mar. 17, p. B5)

It is noteworthy that I could not find a single report of any case where a gun, pipe, or a pool ball in a sock was used by a student in a Canadian school during the 18-month period. This suggests that claims that there are “always guns” or other weapons in the possession of youths in schools are grossly over estimating the problem. The most commonly reported weapons used by aggressive youths were the body (i.e., kicks and punches), words (i.e., teasing and rumours), and knives.

Finally, authors promoting the mean girls frame argued that young people who use violence learn that aggression can lead to power, and this can lead to various types of violence in adulthood. This slippery-slope-style argument is evidenced in the following quotation; “That’s a very dangerous lesson [violence can lead to power] which taken out into life transfers across developmental stages into date violence, gang behavior, delinquency in adolescence, child abuse, wife assault, elder abuse, workplace harassment, sexual harassment” (Pepler, as cited in Moore, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, March 29, p.45). As demonstrated in Chapter 2, these allegations are empirically unfounded.

**The causes.** Causes identified within this news frame were mostly micro-level and include: broken homes (bad parents, mostly bad mothers); low self-esteem; a lack of parental control; drug abuse; and so on:

They cite everything from drugs, parental neglect, peer pressure, sex and violence in the media and entertainment worlds to lack for moral training or good role models. But no one seems to be able to put a finger on a satisfactory answer [of why girls’ aggression is increasing], especially when the violence ends in a shocking murder, as it did with the 14-year-old Reena Virk in Victoria B.C. (Gibson, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, July 5, p. 55)

Despite claims that girls’ violence was rampant, violent girls such as the ones involved in Virk’s murder were characterized as “not your average girls” (Mandel, *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 30, p. 40). Violent girls;

...are usually females who come from horrific childhoods, angry and alienated, who have no parental counterbalance to the onslaught of media messages of sex and violence. “They’re hungry for a sense of belonging and a sense of power and status” [Dr. Sybille Artz]. (Mandel, *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 30, p. 40)

This quotation highlights two other common causes recognized in this frame. The first is that media messages such as the Spice Girls’ “girl power” motto are partially to blame for the girls’ increasing use of aggression. Social anxiety over girl power “is a

projection of a desire to retrieve a patriarchal social order characterized by gender conformity” (Barron & Lacombe, 2005, p. 65). The second argument is that girls use bullying to attain status and power to attract boys. Thus, girls’ bullying is, for the most part, essentialized to girls’ desire to get a boyfriend or male attention and approval:

What do they use that power for? Why, to attract boys, of course. Let anyone get in their way and there’s hell to pay... In the [girl] code, sexual rivalry is seen as an obvious reason to duke it out. (Mandel, *The Sun*, 1997, Nov. 30, p. 40)

These causes support research showing that media blame women’s liberation for girls’ and women’s increased use of aggression (e.g., Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Jiwani, 1999; Schissel, 1997, 2006). This argument is exemplified in the following quotations from an interview by Micki Moore (special columnist to *The Sun*) with Dr. Pepler;

Q: We are shocked over these violent incidents, but more so because they are perpetrated by girls. Whatever happened to “sugar and spice and everything nice?”

A: Those were the stereotypes that prevailed when we were growing up. However, with feminism we have given young women a message that they can be equal to boys, and they can strive for many of the same things... What’s shocking today is that there has always been a subset of girls who have been aggressive and at risk for this type of behavior. What is new is that these girls are moving this aggression out of confined contact, such as family and close relationships, and into the community where it is more typical of boy’s behavior. (Pepler, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, Mar. 29, p. 44)

Pepler is a psychology professor at *York University* in Toronto, Ontario. She has done much academic work on girls’ bullying and was a commonly cited expert witness to this frame. Barron and Lacombe (2005) also found that Pepler was commonly cited in support of the nasty (i.e., mean) girl frame.

Petty instigations such as insults and rumours were also commonly cited causes of girls’ violence: “Danger at schools: ‘Mostly, violence starts from the basic things like gossip, rumours, a misguided look or even brushing up against someone in a hallway’”

(Pingue, *The Star*, 1998, March 17, p. B5). This implies that girls are violent because they are easily angered by common acts of relational aggression. Thus, girls require very little instigation to resort to violence. It also artificially equalizes girls' use of relational and violent aggression since relational aggression appears to be predictive of violent aggression: The existence of one ensures that the other will occur. This falsely legitimizes the sex-symmetry in violence thesis that females are equally as aggressive as males.

Also, girls were commonly described as “downright mean” or “evil”: “Girl intended to kill 9-year-old, judge says: Teen found guilty of ‘calculated act of evil’” (Headline, Currie, *The Star*, 1998, Jan. 10, p. A5). Misrepresenting girls as intrinsically bad, mean, or evil promotes the fallacy that girls are easily brought to violence because it is “in their nature”.

Additionally, the moral framework of youths has allegedly changed over time:

[Constable Chris] Hosley points to the escalating *manner* of teen violence more than numbers. “Ten years ago, if there was a fight, the kids punched someone out. Now, if there’s someone down, they step on them. It’s the moral framework that’s changed.” (emphasis in original, Teshler, *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 28, p. A2)

The meaning of “step on them” was not clearly explained, but this descriptor implies brutality, force, and degradation of the victim. This quotation and others like it (which I provide in the next section) appeal to nostalgic yet unsubstantiated notions that kids today are not “good” like we (the readers) were as children. Barron and Lacombe (2005) found similar results, in that journalists often compare the past to the future to demonstrate, “just how bad things have become” (p. 52). Additionally, as explained in Chapter 3, Cohen’s theory of moral panic includes dichotomous categories of “good” and “bad” such as those described above (i.e., kids now are bad, kids of the past were good). Accordingly, these findings provide added support for Cohen’s theory.

In this frame, popular female in the media were commonly blamed for normalizing female aggression and, thus, they are held partially responsible for girls' increased use of aggression:

Suddenly those verbal taunts are escalating into group brawls, thrown punches, pulled hair. Hey, Danielle House did it and lands on the cover of *Playboy*. The band Rockbitch does it on stage. Alanis Morissette screeches out her anger on the radio. "There seems to be more permission for girls to be aggressive," worries [Dr. Debra] Pepler. (Mandel, *The Sun*, 1997, Nov. 30, p. 40)

But none of these theories can match the one trotted out last week by Victoria professor Sibille [Sybille] Artz. She blames the Spice Girls. As if we needed another reason to dislike them.

Artz, whose claim to fame is the sensationally titled book *Sex, Power and the Violent Schoolgirl*, figures the British pop group's Girl Power message is destructive because it tells girls to compete with other girls for male attention. (Williamson, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, July 25, p. 3)

**The moral judgements.** As indicated above by Pepler and Mandel, moral judgements in this frame suggest that women and girls are undeserving of the stereotypical labels of "innocent victim," and "sugar and spice and everything nice." Additionally, the "abuse excuse" – which is that girls act out aggressively as a result of abuse by a close male – was presented as unfair to boys and men who are, allegedly, equally abused. For example, in an article on December 4, 1997 from *The Star* entitled, "Sugar 'n' spice and anything but nice", author Williamson stated;

*When She Was Bad* is an enthusiastic refuting of the "myth of innocence," which Pearson says is just a feminist spin on the old sexist stereotype of girls as "sugar and spice and everything nice." Looking into taboo subjects like husband battering, infanticide and use of the "abuse excuse" she presents plenty of evidence that, in fact, women are equally evil – but routinely given more lenience in court... Artz, in an interview with *Maclean's*, says a violent girl has "very likely been subjected to physical violence... often has a troubled relationship with her father, who ... is controlling and physically violent." (There we go again, blaming a man) (p. 16)

Williamson's comments indicate that she doubts the validity of such contextual analyses of female violence. Thus, though contextual analyses are integral to understanding social phenomena like violence, abuse, and bullying, they are easily brushed aside by news reporters like Williamson as man hating feminist nonsense. Such arguments lend more support to the unsubstantiated sex-symmetry of violence thesis.

Reporters utilizing this frame also questioned the maternal instincts of violent females by implying that there is something wrong with their femininity. They also commonly argued, nostalgically, that youth (especially girl) aggression had increased dramatically in frequency and severity from when they (the authors) were young. This implied a moral and behavioural change in the present for the worse compared to the past:

I don't remember many stories like this when I was growing up, let alone so many packed into a single edition of the daily newspaper. Certainly we committed violence on each other but, whatever you want to say about guys like Gary, they never hit you with anything that wasn't biologically attached to their bodies. As for weapons, well, that's why God created gym class. (Pevere, *The Star*, 1998, Apr. 18, p. M3)

But, and I know I'm probably showing my age here, when did girls jump from being merely unruly, tempestuous, hormone-addled teenagers to being hard-as-nails, militant, sometimes violent and vicious harpies? (Gibson, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, July 5, p. 55)

Authors like Pevere and Gibson show that increased media attention to a topic can easily be misinterpreted as increased prevalence of a problem. While changes in news reporting do not necessarily reflect actual crime rates, stories in both papers reflect a popular assumption that it does.

**The remedies.** Solutions proposed in this news frame include more punitive zero-tolerance antibullying policies, rehabilitation for youths with substance abuse problems,

and early intervention and prevention programs. Additionally, recommendations were made for attaining a better understanding of girls' use of aggression in schools through better collection of statistics on female violence. These statistics should take into account a, "wider view of domestic violence, one that accommodates real human nature" (Williamson, *The Sun*, 1997, Dec. 4, p. 16). Here, "real human nature" is defined thusly: "Women also exist who fight back, sometimes just as violently – or who bully and torment men" (Williamson, *The Sun*, 1997, Dec. 4, p. 16). It seems Williamson, the author, is unsympathetic to females who are violent in self-defence. Accordingly, she wants more statistics on girls' use of aggression, as she believes that statistics inaccurately portray females as the primary victims, and males as the primary offenders, of violence.

Like Barron and Lacombe (2005) and Schissel (2006) discovered, another popular remedy was to "toughen-up" the YOA: "Short of committing murder, a young offender can assault, rape, and pillage his way through a host of crimes, knowing that the maximum sentence he will get is three years. The average time served is actually three months" (Harris, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, May 10, p. 2). Recommendations for change to the YOA typically included stiffer sentences and transferring violent and repeat young offenders to adult court to increase the duration of prison sentences and retention of criminal records. It was also recommended that media be allowed to publish the names of violent delinquent youths:

Facing anger in her native Alberta about a Young Offenders Act that gave one year in jail to the girls who lured Reena Virk to a murderous beating, Anne McLellan [Federal Justice Minister from 1993-2006] would like to fix the problem. She would like to hand out stiffer sentences for the worst crimes and deal more harshly with repeat offenders, possibly by transferring their cases to adult court. She would also like to publish the names of youths involved in violent

crimes in the interests of protecting society. (Harris, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, May 10, p. 2)

Factors under consideration [for changes to the YOA] include the age of an offender and seriousness of a crime. Should all young offenders be identified? Should publication be restricted to those convicted or accused of serious violent crimes? Should an amended law apply to juveniles aged 12 to 15? Should it be left to a judge to make the decision? (Vienneau, *The Star*, 1997, Nov 29, p. C7)

As well, this frame promoted the Conservative government's Crime Control Commission established by Premier Mike Harris in 1997. The Commission called for increased responsibility for parents of young offenders, suspensions of young offenders' drivers' licences, public shaming, an end to automatic access to legal aid for young offenders, and other changes to the YOA that go beyond the proposed changes brought to Ottawa at that time. They also called for the introduction of a zero-tolerance "Safe Schools Act" for "schoolyard crimes" (Boyle, *The Star*, 1998, June 2, p. A3). Ontario, Canada's *Safe Schools Act* (SSA) was passed in the year 2000, only 3 years after Virk's murder. This Act ensures that youths will be suspended, expelled, and/or face police involvement for a wide variety of misbehaviours, much like the Canadian school-based violence prevention programs evaluated by Day et al. (2002).

Interestingly, *The Star* reported that Federal Justice Minister Anne McLellan promoted conflicting messages about appropriate responses to youth crime. For example, McLellan said that people should understand that tougher laws will not prevent youth crime and violence, yet she was, "careful to point out that she was not advocating a soft approach to violent young offenders" (Vienneau, *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 29, p. C7). McLellan also said that, "we must send a message this behaviour [youth crime, violence, and bullying] is not in any way condoned by Canadian society and it is in fact condemned and condemned very strongly" (*The Star*, 1997, Nov. 29, p. C7). She also made



recommendations for the YOA that would make it more punitive toward violent and repeat offenders (Harris, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, May 10, p. 2). Thus, McLellan's conflicting responses to the mediated climate of fear of youths (especially girls) likely had political underpinnings.

Finally, stories using this frame dismissed statistics showing decreasing youth crime and warnings against toughening up the YOA. Reporters advocating this frame argued that crime statistics are less accurate than evocative anecdotes from police chiefs, a small faction of academics, and victims and offenders of youth aggression. For example;

Police say girl gangs are getting worse, and violence by girls is on the rise. And while statistics vary – some experts say they're skewed because the new “zero tolerance” policy toward violence in schools has sent all youth charges soaring – anecdotal evidence suggests girls are getting meaner and scarier. In other words, never mind the stats – when teen girls are killing, torturing and “machete-swarming,” it's time to take notice... The problem is complex, but changes that would go a long way to fixing it – toughening the Young Offenders Act; a law to make parents more responsible for their kids' crimes, to name two – are long overdue. (n.a., *The Sun*, 1998, Jan 26, p. 14)

As well, [Attorney General Charles] Harnick would like to see youths under 12 who are involved in violent crime dealt with through the justice system. And parents of young offenders should meet the legal aid eligibility criteria if their sons and daughters want their legal bills paid by taxpayers. So don't tell Tom Amba or the McCuaigs [victims of youth crime] the murder rate is down. Don't tell them you're going to tinker with the YOA to come up with yet another toothless law. Don't try to baffle us with statistics. Talk to us about justice – so people like Amba and the McCuaigs can finally put their nightmares to rest. (Blizzard, *The Sun*, 1998, Nov. 3, p. 15)

Blizzard's remarks about “toothless laws” and “justice” denote a need for vengeance. Indeed, the desire for vengeance may be a driving factor behind the eagerness to invest more in punishments than social programs that could prevent offending before it starts.

### **The Realistic Balancing Frame**

Unlike other studies on mean girls in the Canadian press (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Jiwani, 1999; & Schissel, 2006), and as predicted by Carrabine (2008) and McRobbie and Thornton (1995), I found a criticism frame in my sample. Table 4 (see pg. 48) shows that this was the minor news frame in *The Star* during the six-months following Virk's murder. This frame was found in four articles and it was presented exclusively by two reporters: Kim Pate (1 article, an opinion piece) and Michele Landsberg (3 articles, as a special columnist). Although I did not provide in-depth biographies for authors of the previous two frames, I believe it is necessary to do so for the authors of this frame. Since only two authors are responsible this frame and, as I show below, it was presented as the informed response to the mean girls frame, it is useful to know the authors' credentials.

Kim Pate is a lawyer, part-time professor, the executive director of the *Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies* since 1992, and a post-graduate student in the area of forensic mental health. In 1992, she was also the recipient of the Canadian Bar Association's Touchstone Award for her exceptional achievements in promoting equality in the Canadian legal community (Carleton University, 2011). Michele Landsberg, now retired, is an award-winning special columnist to *The Star*. She wrote about social issues such as feminism, media, women's health, and politics, and is the author of three books (Women's College Hospital, 2011).

Articles adopting the realistic balancing frame responded to the articles utilizing the mean girls frame. Accordingly, these articles criticize the mean girls articles and the policies they advocated. For example;

I have received calls recently from reporters, students and members of the public requesting information about the increasing number of girls in gangs. A review of the media indicates the most common causes of this apparent phenomenon are women's desire to be equal to men and the breakdown of the family. This apparently has resulted in girls not having their fathers around to help socialize them. The facts do not support either hypothesis. (Pate, *The Star*, 1997, Dec. 7, p. F3)

Conservative newspapers whipped themselves into a headline frenzy of "girls' brutality" and "girl gang violence" all Winter, the better to discredit the feminist movement that supposedly gave rise to such unnatural horrors. Of course, the crisis was completely manufactured. There is, in fact, no increase in "girls' violence." (If you would like to see how the supposed crisis was inflated, buy the current issue of *This Magazine*, in which reporter Nicole Nolan punctures the media hype.) (Landsberg, *The Star*, 1998, Apr. 11, p. L1)

**The problem.** The problems presented here are complex. As shown in the previous quotations, the first problem proposed by reporters of this frame was that the mean girls frame exaggerated the severity and frequency of girls' violence. Balancing frame authors also contradicted the liberation hypothesis invoked by the mean girls frame.

The second problem presented in this frame was that statistics can be misleading and should be read with caution and evaluated critically:

The development of so-called zero tolerance policies means increased policing and prosecuting of all forms of violence committed by boys and girls. Proportionately, because the over-all number of young women charged with violent offences remains relatively low, the increased numbers create a more substantial percentage increases in the statistics for girls than they do for boys. (Pate, *The Star*, 1997, Dec 7, p. F3)

The third problem was that bullying (by both girls and boys) is still a complex problem that must be addressed through responses focused on prevention rather than punishment:

Anthony Doob agrees with one thing: "You do have to take youth crime seriously," he said in a recent interview. "Violent bullies are not easy to deal with – there's no quick fix. But if you're taking it seriously, you tackle the causes and

try to prevent kids from committing crimes in the first place.” (as cited in Landsberg, *The Star*, 1998, May 9, p. L1)

The fourth problem presented here is that politicians use fear of youth (particularly girls') crime, delinquency, and bullying, for political purposes. Landsberg succinctly summarized this hypothesis in an article entitled, “Queen’s Park whipping up fear on crime”:

Jim Brown bashes youthful criminals for the same reason Mike Harris attacks welfare mothers and Charles Harnick froths about bare-breasted women. It’s the oldest and shabbiest trick in the political books, the equivalent of those shell games that wily con artists play on the streets of New York (They play; you pay)... This government is in the business, not of listening, but of manipulating voters by triggering certain fears and prejudices: welfare cheats, crime, immoral women, foreigners. (Remember when Harris said that the protestors in the Days of Action were just a bunch of Communists and Iraqis?) (*The Star*, 1998, May 9, p. L1)

The final problem identified within this frame is that the mean girls frame mostly ignores the actual causes of bullying, violence, and other social problems. Ignoring issues like racism and other forms of social inequality can only exacerbate social problems. For example:

The legal system reinforces sexist, racist and classist stereotypes of women while simultaneously legitimizing patriarchal notions of the need to socially control women. We must also refuse to fuel panic with exaggerated and inaccurate claims about increased violent offending by women and girls. (Pate, *The Star*, 1997, Dec. 7, p. F3)

**The causes.** As evidenced by the quotations in this section, the realistic balancing frame emphasizes macro-level issues that are mostly ignored by the mean girls frame. These causes include: racism; intolerance; classist and sexist stereotypes; social inequities; patriarchy; political trickery; fear mongering; zero-tolerance policies; overly punitive laws that lead to recidivism; and a lack of after-school programs. The authors

utilizing this frame stress the importance of understanding the meaning of statistics and the contexts of violence to gain a clearer picture of girls' aggression.

**The moral judgments.** In this frame, key moral judgments relate to the potential injustice of jumping to conclusions about trends, causes, and remedies for bullying. Instead, the authors recommend that those interested in the problem of bullying use a more holistic approach that acknowledges social inequities as a major source of crime and delinquency. They also stress that it is not right to manipulate statistics in a way that inaccurately represents girls' bullying as increasing compared to boys' bullying (Pate, *The Star*, 1997, Dec. 7, p. F3). For instance:

If I was in the business of governing, I'd want to consider the advice of experts. Toronto police chief David Boothby, former New York police commissioner William Bratton, University of Toronto criminologist Anthony Doob and Statistics Canada have all told Brown that youth crime is down and a "tough crackdown" on minor offenders is not necessary. But Brown insists that he knows better... The public, in repeated polls, says it's worried about youth crime – but prefers to spend money on prevention rather than punishment. A government that whips up the public's fears in order to exploit them is itself a government to be feared. (Landsberg, *The Star*, 1998, May 9, p. L1)

Authors supporting this frame also argue that bullies are not intrinsically bad. As explained previously, there are various social and structural factors that contribute to bullying. Realistic balancing frame authors also assert that young offenders are being used as scapegoats to distract from larger social problems; "Rather than nurturing our youth, we are scapegoating and disposing of them as though they are expendable human beings" (Pate, *The Star*, 1997, Dec 7, p. F3).

**The remedies.** Proposed remedies in this frame stressed prevention through social change. Change must come from many areas such as family, schools, social programs, legal policy, and youths (both bullies and victims). Preventative measures that

encourage tolerance and teach alternatives to violence were also recommended, as they are more cost effective and promote healthier communities:

There is sufficient evidence that preventative approaches to addressing crime within the context of socio-economic, gender, racial, and ethno-cultural realities are far more cost effective than current criminal justice approaches. Accordingly, we should all work toward and support the enhancement and development of high quality supportive services and assistance for children, youth, and adults. (Pate, *The Star*, 1997, Dec. 7, p. F3)

If we are serious about preventing youth crime, we have a pretty good idea of how to do it. The Rand Corporation, hardly your bleeding-heart liberal think tank, has a report suggesting that extra school supports for delinquents and cash incentives to graduate are more effective and much cheaper than incarceration. Longer-term studies on English and U.S. enriched preschool programs show that good pre- and post-natal care, home visits, high quality day care and parent training all cut the eventual incidence of chronic delinquency. Another proven preventative is a healthy birth weight. (How about that \$37 supplement for prenatal nutrition that you just cancelled, Mr. Premier?). (Landsberg, *The Star*, 1998, May 9, p. L1)

### Summary

It is evident that *The Star's* and *The Sun's* attention to youth violence was strongly affected by Virk's murder. Prior to Virk's murder, 15 articles were written in *The Star* and *The Sun* on the topic of youth violence. The optimistic gender neutral frame was the only news frame found at this time. It utilized gender neutral language, did not over-inflate the problem (with the exception of youth gangs), and promoted social programs involving youth and community members as a remedy to youth violence.

Immediately after Virk's murder, news attention to youth bullying in *The Star* and *The Sun* increased more than five-fold, from 15 articles before her murder to 80 articles after. Also, two new frames emerged: The major frame found in both newspapers was the mean girls frame and the minor frame found in *The Star* was the realistic balancing frame.

The mean girls frame promoted moral panic over girls' bullying and gang membership by exaggerating the severity of the problems, blaming girls almost exclusively for their use of aggression, and recommending more punitive responses to youth misbehaviour. Conversely, the realistic balancing frame argued that girls' aggression is not as severe as the mean girls frame postulates, there are multiple and intersecting causes, and responses should focus on prevention and promoting social equality. In the following chapter, I provide an analysis of the frames and statistics I outlined in this chapter.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The frames identified in this study confirm my hypothesis: The murder of Reena Virk helped fuel moral panic over girls' bullying in two local Toronto newspapers. In this chapter, I first provide the social and political context of the news articles evaluated in this study. Then, I analyze the key themes found in my study, and compare them with the extant literature. The results of my study largely reinforce those of previous studies on news coverage of girls' aggression in Canadian newspapers (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Jiwani, 1999; Schissel, 1997, 2006).

I also discuss implications for future empirical research that will further improve our understanding of this problem. While this study has been informative, there is still much to learn about Canadian moral panics, and specifically, moral panics over aggressive girls. Additionally, I provide a brief analysis of moral panic theory as it relates to the results of this study, as well as suggestions for its future development. Finally, I offer suggestions for future policy change to hopefully reduce the frequency and effects of moral panic.

### **Political and Social Context**

News articles generally reflect the social and political context during which they are written. For instance, during this study's sample's 18-month time frame, there was much media attention to girls, women, feminism, and female criminality. This journalistic attention may have amplified the salience of articles condemning aggressive girls since, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, many of these topics were mentioned in the sample. To better understand those articles then, it is essential that context is taken into account. Thus, I provide a brief description of that context here.



Relevant media attention included a documentary by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) on girls' bullying called *Nasty Girls* (1997). This documentary examined high-school girls' experiences with incarceration and violence, and presented the "nasty girl" as a social epidemic (Barron & Lacombe, 2005). Also, as previously demonstrated, other Canadian newspapers were propagating mean girl moral panic at that time, such as the *Vancouver Sun* (Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Jiwani, 1999; Schissel, 1997, 2006).

There was also much public concern over the British female pop group "The Spice Girls". Their sexualized clothing and attitudes, "girl power" motto, and other pro-feminist messages were routinely referred to in the sample. Another important feminist issue at that time was the debate of whether women should have the right to go bare breasted in public in Ontario.

Finally, there was continued media attention to Karla Homolka and her husband Paul Bernardo. She and her husband sexually assaulted, tortured, and murdered three young Ontario women, including her sister, in the early 1990s. This case was especially shocking since Homolka is one of the very few documented cases of a female serial killer. As evidenced in the previous and current chapters, references to this social and political context were evident in news attention to the problem of girls' increased use of aggression.

### **Mean Girls in the Press**

There are many themes evident among the results of my study. Some provide support for previous studies on mean girls in the press, while others offer new insights into the problem. It is to those themes that I now turn.

**Girl gangs.** Girl gangs were the focus of much media attention, likely as a reflection of media emphasis on the “savage” nature of the “gang-murder” of Reena Virk (Jiwani, 2010, p. 98). The optimistic gender neutral frame and the mean girls frame both identified gang violence as a major problem among youth, while the realistic balancing frame did not.

Proponents of the optimistic gender neutral frame claimed that youth gangs were terrorizing other adolescents. This frame also inflated the involvement of youth gangs in four recent teen suicides. For instance: “4 teen suicides spark extortion complaints: Police downplay link to ‘taxing’ by youth gangs” (Headline, *The Star*, 1997, Oct. 2, p. A6).

Reporters utilizing the mean girls frame also presented youth gangs as a major social problem. However, while they acknowledged that there are more boy gangs than girl gangs (175 to 5 respectively) in the GTA, girl gangs and gang members were reported as meaner, more violent, and pettier than boy gang members.

To support their claim that youth gangs (particularly girl gangs) were a serious problem in the GTA, *The Star* conducted its own study on GTA youths’ involvement in gangs and violence. Reporters for *The Star* claimed that their study confirmed that youth gangs are a serious problem in Toronto and that girl gang members are exceptionally nasty, regardless of their low participation in gangs:

Girls fight too – often more fiercely than their male counterparts. At least five of the 180 gang identified by police are strictly female, including the Ghetto Girls, Lady Crew and the Rucus Girls. Many have both male and female members. (Shephard, *The Star*, 1998, Oct. 24, p. A18).

“Oh they’re killers. They’re worse than us. I wouldn’t go near them,” he says, waving his hands as he talks. “Girl gangs are... crazy. I don’t go near those ones, they’d kill me. They grab rocks and put them (in their) purses and when someone comes they’ll crack ‘em with it. They also carry those bandanas with locks on the

bottom of them. I don't go near them." (Shephard, *The Star*, 1998, Oct. 24, p. A18)

As previously stated, these findings support those of Schissel (2006) that youth gangs became a popular topic of discussion after Virk's murder. However, he found that explicit references to girl gangs were not typical. Reporters of the mean girls frame more commonly referred to girls as killers, evil, "hanging" in crowds, and committing "crimes of feminism" rather than as members of gangs (Schissel, 2006, pp. 90-91). Youth gang discussions more typically referred to ethnic boys or "kids" in general: "Ultimately, 'gang' becomes a racist code word in the media to refer to Aboriginal and immigrant kids" (Schissel, 2006, p. 95). My findings, however, suggest that reporters often referred to girl gangs and girls as members in gangs, and characterized girls in gangs as much worse than boys despite their rarity.

**Manipulative tools.** Contrary to the findings of Jiwani (1999), Barron and Lacombe (2005), and Schissel (1997, 2006), reporters promoting mean girl moral panic did not commonly manipulate statistics to support their claims. However, authors of the mean girls frame relied on a number of other manipulative tools to justify their mean girls hype. Some of these tools support the findings of previous studies, while others are novel.

**Nostalgia.** Nostalgia was a commonly utilized manipulative tool. Reporters claimed that evidence of girls' increasing use of aggression was in the dramatic difference between the kids of "our day" (i.e., in the past) compared to those of today:

But, and I know I'm probably showing my age here, when did girls jump from being merely unruly, tempestuous, hormone-addled teenagers to being hard-as-nails, militant, sometimes violent and vicious harpies? (Gibson, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, July 5, p. 55)

I don't remember many stories like this when I was growing up, let alone so many packed into a single edition of the daily newspaper. Certainly we committed

violence on each other but, whatever you want to say about guys like Gary, they never hit you with anything that wasn't biologically attached to their bodies. As for weapons, well, that's why God created gym class. (Pevere, *The Star*, 1998, Apr. 18, p. M3)

Pevere also suggested in the previous quotation that the increased media attention to aggressive girls is more evidence of that the problem is rising. This is misleading to readers who do not know that increased media attention to a topic does not mean it has increased in frequency of occurrence. Thus, appealing to readers' lack of knowledge about media and crime, as well as their sense of nostalgia, were common tools utilized to manipulate consumers.

**Expert witnesses.** Expert witnesses such as Artz, Pepler, and Pearson were often quoted in support of the mean girls frame. As Jiwani (1999), Barron and Lacombe (2005), and Schissel (1997, 2006) discovered, expert witnesses strongly relied on micro-level circumstances and media to explain girls' aggression:

...are usually females who come from horrific childhoods, angry and alienated, who have no parental counterbalance to the onslaught of media messages of sex and violence. "They're hungry for a sense of belonging and a sense of power and status" [Artz]. (Mandel, *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 30, p. 40)

They [experts] cite everything from drugs, parental neglect, peer pressure, sex and violence in the media and entertainment worlds to lack for moral training or good role models. But no one seems to be able to put a finger on a satisfactory answer [of why girls' aggression is increasing], especially when the violence ends in a shocking murder, as it did with the 14-year-old Reena Virk in Victoria B.C. (Gibson, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, July 5, p. 55)

Perhaps the reason that no one could satisfactorily explain girls' aggression as Gibson argues was because the experts did not offer holistic explanations. Parents, media, and peer pressure do play a role in girls' aggression, but so do patriarchy, sexism, and racism, for example (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008).

Reliance on such a specific and small subset of experts implies that they were chosen based on their alliance to a particular perspective on the topic. In other words, these experts were consulted or referenced because their work and beliefs support the mean girls frame, while other equally qualified and accessible experts whose work refutes the frame were not referenced or consulted (e.g., Meda Chesney-Lind, Kim Pate, Walter DeKeseredy, and Yasmin Jiwani).

*Anecdotes over statistics.* Surprisingly, reporters commonly acknowledged that the statistics do indeed show a declining trend in youth crime and delinquency. However, they argued that readers should ignore these statistics because they are inaccurate: “Don’t try to baffle us with statistics” (Blizzard, *The Sun*, 1998, Nov. 3, p. 15).

Anecdotes of strategically chosen experts, victims, and bullies were provided as supplemental evidence. By reporting experiences, opinions, and fears of individuals and presenting them as representative of the problem, reporters easily dismissed statistics as meaningless and drew on consumers’ emotions:

Police say girl gangs are getting worse, and violence by girls is on the rise. And while statistics vary – some experts say they’re skewed because the new “zero tolerance” policy toward violence in schools has sent all youth charges soaring – anecdotal evidence suggests girls are getting meaner and scarier. *In other words, never mind the stats – when teen girls are killing, torturing and “machete-swarming,” it’s time to take notice.* (emphasis added, N.a., *The Sun*, 1998, Jan. 26, p. 14)

As previously stated, presenting ritualized and dramatized interviews are essential to the symbolization process of moral panic theory’s inventory phase (Cohen, 1987). Thus, articles utilizing this reporting practice fed the exaggeration and distortion process of mean girl moral panic. This aided in the symbolic transformation of the mean girl folk devil from the original concept of aggressive girls.

*Creating statistics.* The final manipulative journalistic practice was to generate statistics. As previously stated, *The Star* conducted a study on Toronto youth gangs and aggression, which consisted of an historical review of Canadian youth gang incidences, a survey, and interviews. Not surprisingly, unlike official studies like UCR's and self-report studies, *The Star's* study confirmed its reporters' repeated claims that the existing statistics on youth crime and delinquency are inaccurate, girls' aggression and gang involvement are indeed increasing, and their use of aggression is more harmful than that of boys.

**Antifeminist backlash.** Despite the lack of empirical support, it is not uncommon for antifeminist arguments to be presented favourably in press reports and other news forums. By contrast, news media are less welcoming to feminist scholars and activists who refute or challenge antifeminist arguments (DeKeseredy, 1999; Gill, 1989; Steuter, 1991), "their letters and articles are often subject to greater editorial control" (DeKeseredy, 1999, p. 1266). Furthermore, the Canadian and American governments have used antifeminist and pro-family rhetoric to support inaction and the retraction of previous pro-feminist policy changes (DeKeseredy, 2011; Faludi, 1991; Steuter, 1991). Thus, newspaper attention favouring antifeminist views is not a new phenomenon, and their propaganda has influenced Canadian policy.

This study supports the aforementioned literature asserting that feminist activists and academics do not receive as much media support as backlash proponents. Had the sampled newspapers been more open to pro-feminist perspectives, there would likely have been more articles supporting the realistic balancing frame, a stronger willingness to accept the statistics, and more support for a community centred preventative approach to

the problem of youth crime and delinquency. That feminists such as Pate and Landsberg were published in *The Star* at all is very encouraging as it suggests that media are willing to present the feminist perspective. However, four short articles are not sufficient to inform the public of alternative perspectives on girls' and youth aggression.

Instead of holistic pro-feminist news reports on girls' aggression, the liberation hypothesis and the concept of sex-symmetry in violence were often cited to explain girls' aggression. As explained previously, these arguments were regularly supported by expert witnesses such as Pepler, Artz, and Pearson. For example:

*When She Was Bad* is an enthusiastic refuting of the "myth of innocence," which Pearson says is just a feminist spin on the old sexist stereotype of girls as "sugar and spice and everything nice." Looking into taboo subjects like husband battering, infanticide and use of the "abuse excuse" she presents plenty of evidence that, in fact, women are equally evil – but routinely given more lenience in court... Artz, in an interview with *Maclean's*, says a violent girl has "very likely been subjected to physical violence... often has a troubled relationship with her father, who ... is controlling and physically violent." (There we go again, blaming a man) (Williamson, *The Star*, 1997, Dec. 4, p. 16)

Girl power aside, there are others who argue that girl violence is a natural result of women achieving equality in things like salaries and education. We've acquired some nastier male trappings, too – and not just tattoos and cigars, as that new commercial for Old Spice (no relation [to the Spice Girls]) depicts. (*The Sunday Sun*, 1998, July 25, p. 3)

Thus, girls' bullying appeared markedly worse than that of boys. Also implicit in quotations such as the ones above is that girls' bullying is multi-dimensional (i.e., violent *and* relational), while boys' is merely violent. Thus, aggressive girls appear: (a) more harmful to their peers; (b) more cruel, calculated, and petty; (c) gender inappropriate; and (d) more difficult to identify and control, than boys. By contrast, boys' aggression is (a) simple; (b) honest, as a result of the overt quality of violence; (c) gender appropriate; and (d) easier to identify and control.

As Jiwani (1999) and Barron and Lacombe (2005) discovered, the desire for power through male attention and approval was also commonly presented as a cause for girls' increased use of aggression: "‘They’re hungry for a sense of belonging and a sense of power and status’ [Artz]...What do they use that power for? Why, to attract boys, of course" (Mandel, *The Star*, 1997, Nov. 30, p. 40). Thus, girls' aggression was essentialized to the desire to attract and maintain male attention and approval.

**Girls' aggression is neither new nor rare?** Like Barron and Lacombe (2005) found, some articles in the mean girls frame presented girls' use of aggression as new and rare. Yet, many other articles claimed that this phenomenon appears new, but is, in fact, "neither new nor rare" (Headline, *The Sun*, 1997, Nov. 30, p. 40). The reason given for why it appears new is that girls' expression of aggression has changed because of the women's movement. Since then, girls' aggression has emerged from the home into public territory (see Pepler, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, Mar. 29, p.44). Thus, authors supporting the mean girls frame were inconsistent in how they described the long-term trends in girls' aggression. This likely confused readers and potentially caused them to choose a perspective based on personal experiences.

**Equating relational and violent bullying.** Chesney-Lind et al. (2007, p. 330) assert that there is currently a disturbing trend in bullying prevention and intervention policies that now target relational and violent bullying equally. The belief that they are the same is reflected in this sample. For example: "Danger at schools: ‘Mostly, violence starts from the basic things like gossip, rumours, a misguided look or even brushing up against someone in a hallway’" (Pingue, *The Star*, 1998, March 17, p. B5). Thus, relationally aggressive acts such as gossiping and spreading rumours were presented as



precursors to violence, and as such, they are equally harmful. Hence, policies targeting relational bullying to the same degree as violent bullying appear to offer a gender-balanced and holistic approach toward bullying.

However, there are a number of reasons why equating both forms of aggression is problematic. The most salient reason is that, as I have previously shown, relational bullying and violent bullying are not equally harmful. While violent bullying is harmful and predictive of developmental maladjustment, relational bullying is a part of normal social development and can impart pro-social behaviours. However unpleasant acts of relational aggression may appear, they have positive aspects such as providing the opportunity for “separation, individuation, competition, achievement, and initiation in relationship[s]” (Hadley, 2003, p. 391). Additionally, reacting to both aggressions equally is more damaging to girls since girls are targeted more than boys for their use of relational aggression due to gender stereotypes.

Another problem with equating relational and violent aggression is rooted in relational aggression’s covert nature. Because many relationally aggressive acts are indirect (e.g., rumours and social exclusion), it is especially difficult to identify and respond to compared to violent aggression. As a result, programs and policies addressing this issue like Ontario’s *Safe Schools Act* must broaden their definitions of bullying to include a wide range of behaviours deemed relationally aggressive. This needlessly increases the number of youths targeted, punished, and labelled through these policies and programs (Day et al., 2002).

**Innovation: Zero-tolerance and punishment.** Consistent with Cohen’s (1987) theory of moral panic and Schissel’s (2006) and Barron and Lacombe’s (2005) findings,

recommendations for policy change regularly favoured more punitive responses. Typical examples of recommendations for change included; (a) increasing the duration of youth prison sentences; (b) instituting stronger zero-tolerance antibullying policies in schools; and (c) eliminating publication bans for the names of youth who have committed violent offences:

The problem is complex, but changes that would go a long way to fixing it – toughening the Young Offenders Act; a law to make parents more responsible for their kids’ crimes, to name two – are long overdue. (N.a., *The Sun*, 1998, Jan. 26, p. 14)

As well, [Attorney General Charles] Harnick would like to see youths under 12 who are involved in violent crime dealt with through the justice system. And parents of young offenders should meet the legal aid eligibility criteria if their sons and daughters want their legal bills paid by taxpayers. So don’t tell Tom Amba or the McCuaigs [victims of youth crime] the murder rate is down. Don’t tell them you’re going to tinker with the YOA to come up with yet another toothless law. Don’t try to baffle us with statistics. Talk to us about justice – so people like Amba and the McCuaigs can finally put their nightmares to rest. (Blizzard, *The Sun*, 1998, Nov. 3, p. 15)

The focus of the remedies proposed in the mean girls frame was punishment rather than prevention. Through this frame, proponents claimed the best remedies for youth bullying and crime was for schools to be tougher on youth misbehaviour. Reporters accused schools of being too lenient on bullies, and, in response, the Conservative government’s Crime Control Commission recommended the introduction of the *Safe Schools Act* which, as previously stated, “would include a ‘zero tolerance’ policy for schoolyard crimes” (Boyle, *The Star*, 1998, June 2, p. A3).

Also supporting the previous findings of Schissel (2006) and Barron and Lacombe (2005), journalists frequently asserted that the YOA was too soft on youth crime: “The 1984 legislation [The YOA] has given us daycare dressed up as justice”

(Harris, *The Sun*, May 10, 1998, p. 2). The most commonly identified shortcomings of the YOA are highlighted in the following quotation:

Facing anger in her native Alberta about a Young Offenders Act that gave one year in jail to the girls who lured Reena Virk to a murderous beating, Anne McLellan would like to fix the problem. She would like to hand out *stiffer sentences for the worst crimes* and *deal more harshly with repeat offenders*, possibly by *transferring their cases to adult court*. She would also like to *publish the names of youths involved in violent crimes* in the interests of protecting society. (emphasis added, Harris, *The Sunday Sun*, 1998, May 10, p. 2)

Other, less common recommendations within this frame were for increased social programs to help teach youths about tolerance, learn alternatives to violence, and develop better anger management skills. Also, treatment programs were recommended for youths with substance abuse problems. However, more lenient responses were only recommended for non-violent youths and first-time offenders.

Alternatively, the realistic balancing frame's remedies focused on prevention rather than punishment. The two authors of this news frame argued that, in order to respond effectively to youth crime and delinquency, we must address its many intersecting causes:

There is sufficient evidence that preventative approaches to addressing crime within the context of socio-economic, gender, racial, and ethno-cultural realities are far more cost effective than current criminal justice approaches. Accordingly, we should all work toward and support the enhancement and development of high quality supportive services and assistance for children, youth, and adults. (Pate, *The Star*, 1997, Dec. 7, p. F3)

This frame also proposed treatment programs for youth with substance abuse problems and school programs to help youth address conflicts with others more constructively and without resorting to violence.

### **Policy Implications**

It is clear that both news frames had different priorities for remedies for youth misbehaviour. The mean girls frame favoured punishment while the realistic balancing frame favoured prevention. These findings beg two important questions: (1) Did the moral panic over mean girls in local Toronto newspapers have an effect on Canadian social policies and programs?; and (2) If so, did the changes favour the mean girls frame's punishment model or the realistic balancing frame's prevention model? Due to time constraints, a definitive answer to these questions is outside of the scope of this thesis. However, the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA, 2002) appears to have punishment and social exclusion as its primary objectives for youth crime control.

Five years after Virk's murder, Canada passed the YCJA (2002). The Act eliminated the transfer of youths to adult court, and, instead, the youth court must first determine the guilt of the defendant. Then, under certain circumstances, an adult sentence may be imposed on the young offender. Additionally, the circumstances under which a youth may be given an adult sentence were broadened to include; (a) presumptive offences (i.e., first and second-degree murder, manslaughter, attempted murder, and aggravated assault); and (b) when there is a pattern of serious violent offences, which is defined as having caused or attempted to cause serious bodily harm to another person.

Moreover, the age at which the presumption of an adult sentence is allowed was lowered to 14 years of age. Thus, it is no longer the onus of the Court to show that youths as young as 14 and 15 years-of-age should be given an adult sentence as it was with the YOA. Now, under the YCJA, young offenders 14 years and up who commit presumptive offences or who have a history of violent offences are given an adult sentence unless they

can convince the court otherwise. This change increases the likelihood that young offenders will receive an adult sentence.

Finally, the YCJA allows the publication of identifying information of any young offender to whom an adult sentence is imposed. In effect, the YCJA has made it easier for Canadian courts to impose adult sentences on younger youths, as well as for media to publish their identifying information. This means that, by passing YCJA on February 2, 2002, the Federal Parliament addressed the major recommendations for change to the YOA made in the mean girls frame.

Although the mean girls frame misrepresented youth crime and delinquency, its authors' recommendations for policy change appear to be reflected in the *Safe Schools Act* (SSA, 2000), which requires suspensions and expulsions for various non-serious youth misbehaviours, and the YCJA (2002). Nonetheless, it is still unclear whether either of these policies have made official responses to youth misbehaviour more punitive. Yet, the Canadian Federal Government admitted that part of its motivations for modifying youth justice legislation, such as the SSA and YCJA, is due to news media influenced public perceptions of the problem:

In attempts to address the concerns of Canadians and to react to youth crime, Parliament has, from time to time, proposed amendments to youth justice legislation (we will briefly describe the development of youth justice in the next section). *A number of those amendments were motivated in part by violent incidents involving young persons that had made the headlines and contributed to increased feelings of insecurity among the public* [emphasis added]. Bill C-4 is similar in that regard. The first part of its short title – Sébastien's Law – was chosen in memory of Sébastien Lacasse, who, in 2004, was chased down by a group of youths and killed on a Laval, Quebec, street by a 17 year-old. (Cavasant & Valiquet, 2010)

Thus, media play a vital role in the development of social policy. Moral panics, which incur heightened media attention to a social issue, are highly problematic then.

Media should be more closely monitored and regulated to address this problem. Had reporters been mandated to provide a more realistic and informed perspective on youth misbehaviour, perhaps Canadian youths would appear much less threatening. Also, rather than creating the SSA for example, Ontario might have instead developed more positive school and social programs for youths.

Still, it was a pleasant surprise to find the realistic balancing frame in *The Star*, regardless of its minor contribution to the newspaper. This news frame encouraged readers to take a step back from moral panic and look at the alleged increasing problem of girls' bullying using what C. Wright Mills (1959) refers to as the *sociological imagination*. The sociological imagination allows people to see how individual troubles are public issues by considering the political, psychological, sociological, and historical contexts in which life occurs (Mills, 1959). Accordingly, the realistic balancing frame expressed many of the ideas and research of prominent and accredited scholars in the fields of bullying, youth and girls' delinquency, feminism, communication studies, criminology, and sociology (e.g., Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2009; Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010; DeKeseredy, 2010; Feld, 2009; Males, 2010; Ringrose, 2006; Steffensmeier & Schwartz, 2009). These scholars (including myself) urge others to look at social problems like bullying not as a symptom of individual problems or personal failing. Every action occurs within a social context and this context must be addressed for social problems to ameliorate.

Although the realistic balancing frame was the minor news frame following Virk's murder, it was the most accurate and socially conscious of the two frames.

Hopefully some readers took the realistic balancing frame to heart, rather than be swept

up in the mania of mean girl moral panic. Pearson (1997) rightly pointed out that cultural ideals contribute to the aggression expressed within it, and as I have shown, cultural ideals are learned through, and reflected by, the media. Perhaps then, part of the solution to moral panic lies in *newsmaking criminology*.

Newsmaking criminology is defined as, “the conscious efforts and activities of criminologists to interpret, influence or shape the representation of ‘newsworthy’ items about crime and justice” (Barak, 2007, pp. 191-192). While likely challenging, newsmaking criminology may be a useful tool for avoiding future news media fuelled moral panics and policy change. Criminologists and others knowledgeable about the realities of crime and justice should make an effort to disseminate their knowledge to the public. Pate and Landsberg exemplified this practice through their publications in *The Star*. Again, the fact that their articles were published suggests that *The Star* was open to publishing opposing perspectives to the mean girls frame. However, the drastically different amounts of media attention both news frames received in *The Star* imply that it favoured the mean girls frame over the realistic balancing frame. Had *The Star* received more articles from experts contesting the mean girls frame, they might have provided the opposition additional room to publish on their perspective.

### **Directions for Future Research**

As with all studies, this one has some limitations and recommendations for future study. For instance, while every attempt was made to attain a complete collection of the news articles related to bullying from May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1997 to November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1998, it is possible that some articles were missed. However, it is unlikely that any missed articles would have affected the results since the 30 articles chosen for qualitative analysis were

not randomly selected. They were chosen based on length and if they addressed at least three of the four elements of a news frame. Thus, the 30 articles should theoretically be representative of the sample. Missing articles might have impacted the descriptive statistics, but not enough to alter the results since each six-month time period had drastically different amounts of articles.

Although I analyzed articles and some headlines in this study, I was unable to include an analysis of the many photographs accompanying the articles. This is problematic since visual analysis is important in the study of moral panic in newspapers (Cohen, 1987; Hayward & Presdee, 2010; Schissel, 2006). Through the interplay of headlines, image selection, size, and placement, journalists use texts and images to transmit subtle but powerful messages to readers which can ultimately be misleading to the public (Jones & Wardle, 2010; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). As such, visual analysis is becoming increasingly popular in criminology since it offers the tools to examine the relationship between visual and textual representations of the subject (Hayward & Presdee, 2010; Jones & Wardle, 2010). Visual analysis was not included in this thesis due to time constraints, but future research on mean girl moral panic should pay special attention to visual representations such as in pictures and videos to gain a better understanding of the underlying messages.

Additionally, although there is a strong relationship between the mean girl moral panic after Virk's murder and the creation of Ontario's SSA and Canada's YCJA, this relationship is still only speculative. More research is required to determine whether or not the two Canadian policies were created as a result of, in part or in full, the moral panic observed in this study. For example, interviewing policy makers and politicians



may help to determine if this moral panic influenced their beliefs, political campaigns, or other actions.

Since concern for girls is a long-standing worry rooted in patriarchy and antifeminism, it is very likely that this panic still exists in Canadian newspapers and other news media such as televised news broadcasts and magazines. While the current study has identified and described the moral panic that ensued after – and in part as a result of – Virk’s murder, it is important that future studies seek to identify whether there is currently a moral panic surrounding mean girls in local Canadian news media. Also, it would be useful to investigate whether mean girl moral panic has changed since the late 1990s, since any changes may hold additional implications for the development of moral panic theory than those described in the next section of this chapter.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The results of this study mostly support Cohen’s (1987) theory, providing yet another example of moral panic in practice. As predicted, my study found that this news media fuelled moral panic is characterized by:

- a) Increased frequency of reporting on bullying after Virk’s murder that faded over time;
- b) Journalists’ reporting on bullying after Virk’s murder focused on girls’ bullying;
- c) Reporting on girls’ bullying after Virk’s murder was negative, in that it:
  - i. Reported girls’ bullying as “bad and getting worse”;
  - ii. Blamed girls and parents almost exclusively for their aggressive behaviours; and,
  - iii. Almost exclusively suggested increased punitive responses.

In this section, I discuss how my findings relate to moral panic theory, as well as a number of the criticisms of moral panic that I described in Chapter 3. Since this study focused on one moral panic in only two Toronto newspapers, these results are not representative of all moral panic, nor are they reflective of all newspapers in the GTA. However, they do have implications for future theoretical development of moral panic since this was indeed a moral panic.

**From “girls only” to “youths and especially girls”.** Frame analysis showed that the discourse on youth aggression evolved overtime in my sample. Before Virk’s murder, there was an optimistic, gender neutral, and meso-level (i.e., individual and large scale) perspective of the problem. Immediately after Virk’s murder, though, discussions switched to a micro focus on mean girls, presenting the problem as an ever increasing social epidemic caused by girls’ innate “meanness” and the women’s movement. Eventually, reporting shifted to a general discussion of youth crime and delinquency, youth gangs, and implementing punitive responses, all with the underlying message that girls are “worse” than boys.

It may seem counterintuitive that discussions in the mean girls frame changed from a “girls only” focus to one on “youths and especially girls” during the year following Virk’s murder. However, recall that this pattern is characteristic of the reaction phase of Cohen’s moral panic theory (1987). In this phase, discussions shift from the original event or actor and focus instead on responses to it. Since it would appear sexist to target laws and programming exclusively on girls, concerns about girls’ aggression evolved into discussions about managing youth misbehaviour.

**Balancing criticism frames.** As stated in Chapter 3, one reason for utilizing frame analysis in this study was to uncover whether an oppositional frame existed in the sample following Virk's murder. The existence of such a frame would support the argument that moral panic theory overstates the eclipsing abilities of mediated panics (Jewkes, 2004). Indeed, I did find a criticism frame after Virk's murder. This frame was the realistic balancing frame and was only found in *The Star*.

The realistic balancing frame offered readers the opportunity to learn more about the information the mean girls frame told them to ignore. It encouraged readers to use their sociological imagination and informed readers about the dangers of moral panic, political trickery, and creating knee-jerk Band-Aid solutions such as increasing punitive responses for youth misbehaviour.

Unfortunately, the realistic balancing frame was marginal compared to the mean girls frame. The realistic balancing frame had only four articles compared to the 41 articles representing the mean girls frame. This number is equal to less than 10% of the total articles on youth bullying following Virk's murder.

The frames also did not receive equal priority, as evidenced by their locations in the newspapers. Articles supporting the realistic balancing frame were not included in high priority sections of *The Star* like the *News* section, and there were no articles of this frame in *The Sun*. Pate's article was published in the *Opinion* section of *The Star*, while Landsberg's were published in the *Life* section. In contrast, articles supporting the mean girls frame were commonly included in the *News* section of *The Star* and other high priority sections of the paper. They were also included throughout the many pages of *The*

*Sun*, varying from front page news to articles of lesser importance near the middle and back of the paper.

The length of the articles was another differentiating factor between the frames. The four articles of the realistic balancing frame were short; no more than one-third of a page each. Comparatively, there were numerous articles supporting the mean girls frame, and many are one to three full pages each.

These results suggest that the two Toronto newspapers promoted moral panic over aggressive girls following Virk's murder. Although this moral panic was criticized by guest reporters, the mean girls frame strongly overpowered the opposition frame through author status as well as quantity, length, and position (i.e., priority) of its articles. Thus, the results of my study do not provide much support to the criticism that mediated moral panics are balanced by counter frames. However, these results do not preclude the possibility that Jewke's (2004) criticism of moral panic theory is correct since this study shows that counter frames do occur in Canadian media. Also, it is possible that oppositions to the mean girls frame were communicated through other means than newspapers, like other media or political debate. Unfortunately, due to this study's focus on newspapers, it cannot address this question. Future study is needed to investigate where such criticisms emerge, and whether they can effectively balance news coverage promoting moral panic.

**Binary divisions of good and bad.** Another criticism addressed by my sample was that moral panics do not dichotomize between "deviant" and "normal" in cosmopolitan locations like Toronto. Toronto is very cosmopolitan in that its population is an amalgam of different ethnicities and religions. Although Toronto journalists did at

times present dichotomous categories, I found that, overall, they presented three different groups rather than two: (1) “Us”, the consumer; (2) aggressive boys; and (3) aggressive girls. The consumer was depicted as the good bystander or victim, boys were characterized as bad, and girls were worse than boys because they were “wicked” and “evil”.

These results provide some support for this criticism since there were three categories of characterization rather than two, as a dichotomy suggests. Yet, the categories were still very rigid and exclusive, suggesting that the original theory is still valid. Perhaps moral panics do not always dichotomize between good and evil, but this sample shows that they strictly define groups as needed. In this case, it was important to differentiate between good and bad, but it was also important to differentiate between degrees of bad. Morally berating girls for their use of aggression required the acknowledgment of boys’ use as well, who served as the barometers to show how much worse girls are by comparison.

**Moral panics and long-term social anxieties.** Cohen’s original theory also asserts that moral panics are short-lived but can recur; such as moral concern over youth cultures (1987). This implies that public distress for topics of moral panic dissipate once media discontinue propagating it. Although the anxiety over aggressive girls continues to disappear and then re-emerge in media, there is evidence that this worry is never entirely a non-issue. Concern over aggressive girls is evident in many media such as movies and television, and are not limited to 1997 and 1998 (e.g., *Mean Girls* and *Odd Girl Out* from 2004). Also, as previously shown, this particular moral panic is a symptom of larger social structures and beliefs such as patriarchy, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and

antifeminism. Until such beliefs are no longer so prevalent, it is likely that public concern over girls' aggression will continue to re-emerge in media.

Thus, as Carrabine (2008) argued, not all moral panics disappear once strong media attention dissolves. Moral panic theory should acknowledge that moral panics can also be short-term periods of heightened media attention to a long-term social concern. However, this begs an important question: Do long-term social concerns that re-emerge as panics (e.g., aggressive girls) have stronger effects on policy than short-term panics? Future study should investigate this question through long-term study of moral panics.

### **Summary**

The results of this study suggest that Virk's murder helped fuel a media generated moral panic over girls' bullying in two local Toronto newspapers. This moral panic overestimated the frequency, severity, and impacts of girls' bullying, and strongly emphasized increasing punitive social controls for youth who misbehave. Boys' bullying as well as racism, sexism, heterosexism, patriarchy, and other social problems were either ignored or downplayed by journalists propagating the mean girls frame.

Media are integral to modern culture, serving as entertainment, communication tools, and sources of information such as the news and personal improvement. Yet, despite all its great uses, media may be adding to North America's unnecessary and harmful culture of fear. Unfortunately, media affects are difficult to measure and there is currently no consensus on whether, and, to what extent, media determines fear of crime (Carrabine, 2008; Jewkes, 2004; Lee, 2007). However, my study and others like it (e.g., Cohen, 1987; Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Jiwani, 1999; Schissel, 1997, 2006) suggest that media are indeed influencing people's beliefs about, and fears of, the world around them.

This fear is reflected in the policies and programs politicians recommend and pass that match journalistic recommendations, such as those made in the mean girls frame.

To combat media's ill effects, more controls must be placed on news sources to curb moral panics before they become institutionalized through policies and programs. Conversely, while perhaps difficult, criminologists should make every attempt to engage in newsmaking criminology. This practice could be instrumental in decreasing the frequency and ill effects of moral panic. This study suggests that media are powerful, but so is knowledge. Those in possession of knowledge have a responsibility to share it for the betterment of society.

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