Moralising Discourses: Women & Girls in the First World War

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Background

Revisiting Moral Panics: a critical examination of 21st century social issues and anxieties

An ESRC funded Seminar Series

http://moralpanicseminars.wordpress.com
Today’s lecture

• Huge social, political and economic changes accompanied the war

• Ideas about gender and class were both challenged and reinforced at this time:
  – Women, girls and the home
  – Women, girls and the workplace
  – Women, girls and the streets

• Social work played a key role in this
Women, girls & the home

• Women’s first duty was to home and family
• They were guardians of the morals of the nation, superior beings, men’s ‘better half’
• These ideas crossed social classes, but were reinforced by feminists, social reformers, social workers
And the purpose of sex…?

• The purpose of sexual desire was procreation; any form of recreational sex (including prostitution, homosexuality and masturbation) was considered a perversion of the sex drive

• Special messages for women in this:
  – “Woman, if physically and mentally normal, and properly educated, has but little sensual desire” (Richard von Krafft-Ebing 1886)
But – uneasy times too...

- Battle for the vote at its most popular & most militant in the years before war
- Questions asked about female pleasure, homosexuality & birth control
- ‘The flapper’: symbol of ‘modern’ young woman from 1910s
Propaganda reinforced women’s place

Women of Britain say -
"GO!"

To the Women of Britain.

1. You have read what the Germans have done in Belgium. Have you thought what they would do if they invaded this Country?

2. Do you realise that the safety of your home and children depends on our getting more men NOW?

3. Do you realise that the one word "GO" from you may send another man to fight for our King and Country?

4. When the War is over and someone asks your husband or your son what he did in the great War, is he to hang his head because you would not let him go?

WON'T YOU HELP AND SEND A MAN TO JOIN THE ARMY TO-DAY?
Women, girls & the workplace

• Mixed messages – women’s work was needed! BUT women’s first duty was to home and family: work was temporary; pay (& childcare arrangements) should reflect this

• Married women should not be working if at all possible

• Young w-c women were vulnerable; their work (& lives) must be supervised
For example...

• “The great and paramount duties of a mother and wife once adopted, every other interest sinks, by the beneficent laws of our nature, into a subordinate place in normally constituted minds... Where necessity and poverty compel mothers in the lower ranks to go out to work, we all know too well the evils which ensue” (Frances Power Cobbe, pp 68-69).
And yet, in reality...

• Women in paid work – from 5966,000 July 1914 to 7311,000 in July 1918*

• Working-class women had always worked! But war work brought better pay for women, esp those doing ‘men’s’ work, and it gave an outlet for their patriotism

• It also allowed them to leave their homes & villages and try something new - women were “out of the cage”
Working-class women
Middle-class women

• Feminists put suffrage claims on hold
• Many wanted to do their bit for the war effort & to prove their worth – became welfare supervisors, factory inspectors and reform association workers – early social workers!
• Also worked for WVR, VAD (incl pacifists, often nursing) and later WAAC (Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps) as nurses, domestics and ambulance drivers behind lines in France
• Very much within women’s maternal, caring roles; many were working unpaid
V.A.D.
NURSING MEMBERS, COOKS, KITCHEN-MAIDS,
CLERKS, HOUSE-MAIDS, WARD-MAIDS,
LAUNDRESSES, MOTOR-DRIVERS, ETC.
ARE URGENTLY NEEDED
APPLICATION TO BE MADE TO
Letter from Vera Brittain to her fiancé, Roland Leighton

“I can honestly say I love nursing, even after only two days. It is surprising how things that would be horrid or dull if one had to do them at home quite cease to be so when one is in hospital. Even dusting a ward is an inspiration. It does not make me half so tired as I thought it would either... The majority of cases are those of people who have got rheumatism resulting from wounds. Very few come straight from the trenches, it is too far, but go to another hospital first.”
So...

• Ideas about women & girls being challenged by women’s participation in men’s work…
• Women had greater freedom and autonomy than ever before…
• Suffrage demands were on the back burner but had not gone away…
• The war brought excitement and a feeling that things wouldn’t ever be the same again
• Result = ‘KHAKI FEVER’!
"The most distressing feature of the evil as it exists here, however, is the number of quite young girls, between the ages of 15 and 18, who haunt the streets near the Australian Military Headquarters, and thrust themselves on men who, it must be confessed, are not always displeased by their attentions. Hundreds of these girls are to be seen about the district every night, and the arrival of a thousand men or more from time to time invariably brings them flocking towards the Horseferry Road in even greater numbers." (24 February 1917 p6)
Women, girls and the streets

• The streets = danger, out of control
• Working-class young women in need of protection, from men and from themselves!
• But so too were some men!
• Role for women police
“Who and what are Women Patrols?”

• “They are not detectives, neither are they rescue workers… but they are friends of the girls. Girls, who, over-excited by the abnormal conditions caused by the great war, flock to places where men in khaki are stationed… It is small wonder our lads and lasses throng the places where soldiers are collected. But it is clear these places are not where girls should spend their leisure hours, and by so doing they run into grave moral danger” (Carden 1916: p.1).
• Over 6,000 women working as women police in WW1
• M-c women protecting and constraining w-c women & at the same time, creating a new role for themselves in moral welfare/ policing/ social work
So what was going on here? An example of a moral panic

- ‘A condition, episode, person or group emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests
- its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media
- the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people
- socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions
- ways of coping are evolved or resorted to;
- the condition disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Cohen 1972)
And in more depth...

• The argument is not that there is “nothing there” ... but that the reaction to what is observed or inferred is fundamentally inappropriate (Cohen 2002)

• There is a moral dimension to the social reaction, particularly the introspective soul-searching that accompanies these episodes; the deviant conduct in question is seen to be symptomatic e.g. of a wider malaise (Garland 2008)

• Moral panics draw attention away from other important social issues & contribute to wider fear. They are not one-off disturbances – they reappear, connecting to shifts in the social order (Young 2008)
Reviewing khaki fever as a moral panic

• I believe this was a moral panic: the claimed threats associated with it were always far greater than the dangers really were; the panic subsided quickly during then after the war, only to re-emerge between the wars and later in the Second World War, this time focused on women running after American GIs

• And there were consequences, positive and negative...
The moral panic allowed different things to happen...

- Some young women were protected from sexual assault
- But women were confirmed as passive and vulnerable, rather than as sexual agents – anything else was considered transgressive
- A career path for middle-class women – as moral welfare workers and police officers – was created
- A paradox within feminism & within social work was reinforced
So why does this matter to social work today?

• Social work agencies, voluntary and statutory, draw social issues to the attention of others – that’s our job!

• Social workers strive to protect & support the vulnerable

• But deeply conservative messages in all of this – about women and about men, and about young people

• Social work and social workers are deeply implicated as ‘claims makers’
Moral panics today?

- Current concerns about child protection, child sexual abuse, child trafficking, child sexual exploitation, pornography demonstrate widespread social anxiety about men and women, boys and girls, & about ‘race’
- Climate of distrust for authority – the police, government, bankers, social workers? – and a climate of fear
- Leads to risk-averse SW practice and a fearful society as a whole, with increased surveillance (of ‘wrong doers’ & all of us!)
What might we do differently?

• We must continue to highlight concerns! But:

• Be aware that some things may be taken too seriously while others are not taken seriously enough

• Need to be clear that we cannot prevent all harm to children, and we cannot stop young people having sex!

• But if we hold to our values as a profession & mean what we say about social justice we might just continue to make a positive difference in peoples’ lives…
Publications so far

• Check out our blogs:
  http://moralpanicseminarseries.wordpress.com

• And read our articles:
Continued


• And new book series for Policy Press, due 2015!!
References

