

## Moral panics and the state

### Abstract Submission

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Abstract Title: The response to the death of Peter Connelly (baby P):  
an analytical framework

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): Drawing upon 'cultural pragmatics' (Alexander 2003, 2006, 2011) this paper proposes a theoretical framework to help explain and understand the psychosocial processes that led to the response to the death of Peter Connelly. The media coverage that followed news of Peter's death reached "new levels of irrationality" (Butler and Drakeford 2011:199), in which politicians and the media, "actively mobilised public anger towards social work" (Warner 2013:1). My paper explores the interaction of four specific psychosocial processes:

- the notions of 'prediction and prevention' which produced a 'science of child protection' in which risk is banished, and a failure to 'save' a child is deemed to be due to the incompetence of a social worker;
- the lack of ability of society to recognise the existence and the prevalence of child homicide at the hands of known adults;
- the on-going sequestration of information about child homicide by multiple agencies including the government, and
- the shaping of public opinion through the interaction of political opportunism and the media.

The impact of these psychosocial processes is two-fold:

- policy making for children's social care occurs as a reaction to high profile, but relatively rare cases of child homicide,
- new and evolving processes of 'public accountability' are used to provide a proxy solution.

Further, I argue that Alexander's notion of 'cultural trauma' (Alexander 2012) is enacted in the impact on the social work profession, on the children brought into care as

a 'knee-jerk' reaction, and on the public at large. Moral panic theory, I argue, provides useful tools with which to explore the interaction of the media and politicians but it adds little in terms of understanding how and why events unfold as they do. Alexander's cultural sociological perspective builds upon and extends what can be learned from classic and contemporary moral panic theory. Cultural pragmatics draws upon concepts of ritual, symbolic classification, and social solidarity (Durkheim 1915.), semiotics (Saussure 1959; Derrida 1981) and pragmatics, especially performativity (Austin 1959). I argue that cultural pragmatics provides a more useful framework with which to understand not only the psychosocial processes that led to such 'levels of irrationality' but how key actors responded being part of the interactive psychosocial processes themselves. Cultural pragmatics enables greater understanding of the meaning, importance and implications of the response to the death of Peter Connelly. Data released to the Royal Courts of Justice in London in the case of Sharon Shoesmith Vs Ofsted, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, and the London Borough of Haringey (October 2009) include multiple email exchanges which provide a unique opportunity to gain insights into how meaning was created in the interaction between government officials and the independent inspectorate Ofsted. The evidence shows the lengths that senior government and Ofsted officials were prepared to go to in an attempt to take control of the public opprobrium. Their actions were products of, and contributed to, the psychosocial processes and were unlikely to change future reactions or tackle the core issue of child homicide.