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### Suggested Reference

Beddoe, L. (2014). 'Racism, 'bad mothers' and child abuse in news media: A role for social work advocacy'. In *4th European Conference for Social Work Research*. Bolzano, Italy.

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# Presentation objectives

- To provide a very brief overview of an ongoing research project on media shaping of social problems
- To focus mainly on one aspect- the focus on media coverage of child abuse and race/gender narratives
- To consider social work advocacy in uncovering the narrative and telling a different story



# My interest in this topic

- Part of a larger media content analysis study in progress:

“The ‘Feckless, Feral and Dysfunctional’: Moral panics, the media, the state and the fear of a ‘growing underclass’ in New Zealand”

- Media (& social media) tell a cultural story of child abuse- ‘cultural dysfunction’



# Method

- Presenting today some partial results from a media content analysis
- Coded 13 newspaper ‘opinion’ columns and the related comments plus related news stories
- Stories dated from the first use of “the ferals” 28/12/08 to 29/5/13
- Used NVivo 10 for data management and coding



# The NZ Context: Vulnerable Children White Paper and Welfare Reform

- Social Development minister holds the welfare reform and child abuse in her portfolio
- Fails to address structural inequalities
- Rather than inspire debate and discussion about solutions the welfare reform amplifies the ‘feral & feckless’ discourse
- Has adopted a partial “troubled families” approach and has lauded this in public meetings

# Bad parents not poverty





# Child abuse in 'the news'

- We live in an era of mass communication where 'news' is instant and we can all co-produce it
- Child abuse is newsworthy and has impact
- We can all be jurors when we see witness testimony on television, hear recordings of the accused person's phone calls and conversation
- We can participate in discussion of 'cases' and their implications via social networking



# Claims makers & themes from my analysis

- Columnists
  - the ferals
  - Shaming and fertility
- The audience :
  - The 'world gone bad'
  - The discipline and punish crew
  - The sterilisers



## “Abuse a Maori problem”? An example

- Almost 9000 children were victims of physical abuse between 2000 and 2008, yet only 21 became "household names" in the media, according to research carried out by Merchant (2012)
- Just one-third of child deaths were reported in the press, and they were predominantly Maori cases.



## High profile nature of child abuse cases

- The 2006 homicide of twin babies Chris and Cru Kahui provides a telling example of the complex role of media in shaping public understanding of family violence.
- The trial of the twins' father did not result in a conviction
- The spectre of truth and blame remains in the court of public opinion for years, if not decades
- Public interest in the Kahui case was reignited with the Coroner's Inquest conducted in 2012
- A search of NewzText Plus (2006-2012) found 1737 articles with the search term 'Kahui Twins'



## Blaming and shaming

- Macsyna King, the mother of the twin boys, and never charged, told her story to a journalist (Wishart, 2011).
- The *New Zealand Herald* reported that 40,000 people had signed up to a Facebook page to support a boycott on book sales (*New Zealand Herald*, 30/06/11).
- Attacks in columns and social media

# Ferals and the underclass (Laws, 4/3/12)

## “A Boy Born Bad”

- The ferals. These **evolutionary antisocials** have created their own nihilist culture and provide 90% of this country's social problems.
- ...core characteristics that distinguish them: poor education, transience, a dependence on drink and/or drugs, a criminal history, a **welfare lifestyle** and they are **disproportionately Maori**. If you want to see what a feral looks like - and the environment in which they live - stray down to your local district court almost any day of the week. It is theirs - part playground, part **marae**.



## Feral Maori failing

- Linking of child abuse to ethnicity is common among newspaper columnists, who are of course free to make such links without nuanced discussion, with an aim to shame particular populations, for example: ‘We also find that other **great feral Maori failing in** [the perpetrator’s] background. **The sexual molestation by a relative’** (*Press*, 4/03/12).

## And.....bad Maori mothers

- columnists such as Michael Laws specialise in inflammatory judgements about mothers of CA victims – ‘Women such as L are the reason why there are so many **dead Maori children ... they are the enablers – delivering their children to the abuser like a human sacrifice**’ (*Star Sunday Times*, 18/11/12)



# Genetics & bad mothers

“The impression that we received was of someone selfish and self-absorbed, satiated only by substances...**you are the embodiment of all that is wrong with our welfare indulgence.** You are exactly the kind of person who shouldn't be having kids because you can't really care. The nurturing gene is absent. **We have seen. We have observed”.**

Laws, Fairfax News 29-7-12



## Stories that link child abuse to receipt of welfare

- In this example we see the linking between the anti- welfare discourse and child abuse
- There are many : '[the Coroner] is also calling for **all solo parents on a benefit** to be monitored and overseen to ensure the safety of children in their care' (*Daily Post*, 25/08/11).
- Links can be made here to welfare reform strategies- the offer of free contraception to **women on benefits and their daughters**



## Shaming -bad mothers' fertility

- Ordinary newspaper reporting can insinuate judgements by the inclusion of particular facts.
- 'JJ death: Mum pregnant again' (*New Zealand Herald*, 13/12/12).
- Two unrelated deaths of Maori children were also mentioned in the story, with details about family members.



## ‘Nia abuser pregnant’

*New Zealand Herald, 14/11/12*

- ‘A female juror who deliberated on the G murder trial wants the baby removed at birth and K to undergo sterilisation. “I think it’s disgusting, revolting, abhorrent,” said the juror. “There are so many people in this world who would love to have children and can’t have them, and for (K) to be able to go and get pregnant and pop them out whenever she feels like it is just mind-blowing.”’

# A moral panic?

- In the introduction to the new edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen considers that the objects of moral panics are both:
  - ‘new’ threats (2002, p. vii) and
  - manifestations of old threats (p. vii); they are damaging per se and also symptomatic of deeper problems (p. viii); and they are at once transparent and opaque – easily recognisable, but in need of explanation to the public by ‘experts’ (p. viii).
- The ferrets and the associated “sterilise the pests” is manifestation of very old fears/ disgust about poverty and bad mothers are easily made the folk devil

# ‘Chav mum chav scum’

- “The word ‘**chav**’, has become a ubiquitous term of abuse for the white poor”.
- Imogen Tyler explores “the emergence of the grotesque and comic figure of the chav within a range of contemporary British media”
- “Concentrating on the figure of the female chav, and the vilification of young white working-class mothers, Tyler argues that the ‘chav mum’ is produced through **disgust reactions** as an intensely affective figure that embodies historically familiar and **contemporary anxieties about female sexuality, reproduction, fertility, and racial mixing.**”

(Tyler, 2008, p.17)

# A world gone bad

“A quarter of all Kiwi children are raised in families where cigarettes, alcohol, gambling and drugs come first. Three generations of **state sponsored dysfunction** has made these families a costly blight on the working/middle class.

We as a nation have made a system of exceptions and enabled the criminal under class to prosper and grow. Is it time for a few draconian laws to clean the gutters and **reduce the pests?**

And before you get all uppity with your idealists' sensibilities regarding my harsh comments, think about this. Even a female crocodile cares for her offspring, putting her hatchlings safety before her own”. Mcrp (NZHerald, 6/3/13)

## It is a fact- it's in the media

- **Kizzy** #190 05:18 pm Jan 18 2012

“Ferals come in all colours but I have to say that Michael Laws is spot on here saying that time and time again with child deaths and serious crime that there are **brown faces** behind it. Is that racist?...no it's not **it is fact**. At one stage almost daily there was another **brown face baby** killed to the point where I didn't want to read the paper anymore.

# Discipline and punish

Maybe the children need to be taken off these parents as they are unable to care for them? Let's face it if these kids were not born to these parents there would be no child poverty. I planned my family it is not hard to do!!

**TAKE THEIR MONEY AWAY**

Derrick 7/3/13

The removal of the children is imperative because otherwise they are both the greatest victims of the removal of support and the source of the next generation of abusers.

Patrick R 26/11/12

Parents need to be held accountable, and if that means charging them with "not providing the necessities of life", so be it.

Realist 6/3/13

Compulsory birth control implants for beneficiaries, parents being docked benefits for kids school absenteeism, ...would go a long way towards protecting decent law abiding Kiwis in the future.

Simon 18/2/13

‘If you can't feed kids, then don't have any! It's really bloody simple, isn't it? If you're a lazy-arsed loser who's a drain on society then you should be sterilised before you have the opportunity to procreate and create this self-perpetuating cycle of bludgers’.

‘Wasted drug or alcohol addicted parents; serial breeders without the means of support are a scourge on our society and create a barrage of destruction in children's lives who in turn have been repeating learned behaviours over a generational cycle’.

‘Stop rewarding people at 15 for getting pregnant. A benefit for life and they pop out kids with no idea how to care for them or feed them. Sadly these little kids are often seen as an income stream for the lazy parents’.

‘The only half-decent suggestion floated by the government [and scorned by the bleeding-heart liberals] was to give young females [and males] a lump sum of money in return for voluntary sterilisation. No, this is not eugenics it's a voluntary agreement with people who actually care more about their "fix" than their kids’.

## The sterilisers



## So what?

- Blaming and shaming encourages class disgust narratives that distance people from collective responsibility for family violence
- Risks an overly moralistic approach to the most vulnerable families
- Cements an artificial divide between adult and child protective services
- Most vulnerable children and adults may be located where adult services (e.g. DV/ Mental Health) need to have closer engagement
- But ultimately a focus on genetic or racial dysfunction narratives gets the political system off the hook – ignoring poverty, racism, ingrained misogyny and other sources of alienation



# Conclusion

The examples underscore a race / class ideological **moral deviance narrative**

Perpetrator behaviours may seem inexplicable.

**Racism and class-disgust feature** (Tyler, 2008; Warner, 2013)

To counter this is a major challenge

Role for social work?



# Thank you

- Please contact me at [e.beddoe@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:e.beddoe@auckland.ac.nz)
- I blog at Social Work Research in New Zealand  
[socialworkresearchnz.wordpress.com](http://socialworkresearchnz.wordpress.com)
- Twitter @BeddoeE