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Moral panics and the social construction of deviant behavior: a theory and application to the case of ritual child abuse.

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The past offers numerous examples of collective behavior during which widespread, fearful rumors and accusations about dangerous deviants resulted in false accusations of crime against many innocent people. Various terms have been used to label this form of collective behavior: persecution, witch-hunt, scare, and panic. In some cases, the widely feared deviants are products of ethnic, racial or religious stereotypes. The most familiar example is that of anti-Semitic persecutions, including the Nazi program of genocide. In other cases, the invented deviants are creations of pure imagination. The classic example is the European witch-hunt, during which perhaps over one hundred thousand people were executed, because they were believed to possess evil magical powers (Ben-Yehuda 1981; Levack 1987). In still other cases, the deviants are stereotypes of members of groups that are widely believed to be a political threat in a society. An example is the anti-Communist 'Red Scare' in the U.S of the 1950s, during which many thousands of Americans were labeled as subversives and lost their jobs (Caute 1978).

In this article, I suggest a rationale for classifying all these forms of collective behavior together as moral panics. The objective of the article is to develop a theory of the causes and transmission of moral panics. The article first presents criteria for identifying moral panics. Secondly, the article presents models for analyzing the social conditions that cause moral panics and lead to the social construction of definitions of deviance. Finally, the article offers principles for understanding the international transmission of moral panics. In order to illustrate the theoretical analysis, the article presents information about the recent moral panic involving criminal accusations of ritual child abuse by secret, satanic cults.

PART I: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MORAL PANICS

In simplification, a moral panic is a societal response to beliefs about a threat from moral deviants(1). The term "moral panic" was coined by British sociologist Stanley Cohen in his book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers*, a study of British public reaction to the deviant behavior of the "mods" and "rockers"