

Amoral panic: the fall of the autonomous family and the rise of 'early intervention'

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Introduction

In 2008 I suggested that the concept moral panic was, in many respects, past its sell-by date (Waiton 2008). Instead the idea of amoral panic was suggested as an alternative. Some of the key aspects of amoral as opposed to moral panics are:

- the declining use of morality as a framework for panics.
- the growing importance of amoral categories like ‘risk’ and ‘safety’ as central tenets of panics.
- the engagement with individuals as diminished subjects.
- old ‘moral’ institutions are undermined rather than shored up by these panics.
- ‘panics’ are normalised and institutionalised.

Here I look at the transformation of The Family, an institution once notoriously associated with moral panics, something that was associated with moral values and understood and defended as something that was ‘at the heart of society’ (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994: 8). The question is raised, to what extent is the ‘future of the nuclear family’ the basis for panics today? (Cohen 2011: xxii). In particular, I look at the way the idea of the ‘autonomous family’ has all but disappeared, within government and policy discussions of the family, and conclude by suggesting we need to see the rise and rise of ‘early intervention’ policies and initiatives as an illustration of the amoral panic that has developed around the family in the twenty-first century.ⁱ

The rise and rise of ‘early intervention’

In the government document *Next Stop for Early Learning and Child Care* published in 2009, the opening sentence reads, ‘everyone agrees that the first few months and years are the most important in a child’s life’. The document goes on to explain that it is a child’s mother and father than brings up a child – not governments, but then adds ‘but parents need support’ (2009: 3). This is just one of a plethora of documents that have been produced in recent years exploring the issue of intervention, early intervention and ‘support’ for families.ⁱⁱ

This list of documents is further supported by various reports looking specifically at the issue of early intervention, one of the most noticeable being *Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens* (2008), written jointly by the Labour MP Graham Allen and the Conservative MP Iain Duncan Smith. This report emphasises the importance of early intervention for many of the key social policy areas in the UK. It consequently proposes a significant increase in the need to fund early intervention initiative. Over the last decade billions of pounds have been spent on programmes connected with early intervention, most particularly with the development of Sure Start Centres (Stewart 2013). Strongly influenced by claims about neuroscience and the

development of the infant's brain, early intervention was a central social policy in the USA in the 1990s, a decade that George Bush proclaimed was to be the 'decade of the brain' (Wastell and White 2012: 402). In the UK, as we moved into the new millennium Tony Blair explained that if he had an extra billion pounds to spend, he would spend it on the under-fives (Parton 2006: 97).

At the level of political rhetoric (and the lack of political dissent), government policy developments, funding of social policy initiatives, and arguably also in terms of engagement and enthusiasm amongst child care professionals, early intervention has become of major significance in the UK (as it has in the USA).

The autonomous family

The idea expressed in *Next Step for Early Learning and Child Care* that 'parents need support' has become increasingly expressed in government policy documents. For example, launching *Every Parent Matters* in 2007, the education secretary Alan Johnson set out the 'vital role of parents in improving their child's life chances', but also noted, 'Traditionally, parenting has been a "no-go" area for governments. But now more than ever government needs to be supportive of parents who are themselves increasingly seeking help'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Intervention in the family and to prop up the family is not new (Donzelot 1977, Cullan 1996). However, for much of the last two centuries there has been a greater hesitancy about intervening in a unit or indeed an 'institution' that was seen as being at the 'heart of society'. For the establishment, the family was understood to be both a conservative body, a moral rein upon degeneracy, and against militancy (Philips 1988). It was also seen as an important unit for developing a sense of personal responsibility and 'self-government', a liberal, Millsian 'castle' (Mills 1999): As such the idea of intervening in the family was (until recently) seen as problematic.

Looking at the discussion about the family in the nineteenth century one gets a profound sense of how important the ideal of the autonomous ('bourgeois') family was. At a time when classical liberalism flourished, the family was seen as both an ideal and embodiment of the bourgeois value of independence. As the Bergers note, this family was protestant in nature, based on the socialisation of highly autonomous individuals, rejecting tradition it saw action and belief as being self-generating, constructed internally by the self-piloting individual and based upon a morality of hard work, diligence, attention to detail, frugality and the systematic development of will power (Berger and Berger 1983: 110).

The development of strength of character was essential. The question was how can this character be formed? The answer was simple. To have strong characters you needed strong families. And to have strong independent individuals you needed the independent, private family.

The ideal of moral independence faced constant difficulties in the Victorian period with regards to the poor, with the contradictory need to support those in desperate need while maintaining personal responsibility. There was also an elitist suspicion, by some at least, that certain sections of society lacked the capacity to develop their moral independence, however this remained a contested area one often reflecting the elites own belief or disbelief, in the liberal project of the time (Jordon 1974: 25). However, in general, policies were developed with a keen interest in preserving the autonomy of families. Even where charity was given to families it was largely done so only if it could be seen to be improving rather than undermining the moral independence of those involved. In contrast to family policy developments today, it was the development of the ‘character’ and ‘self-reliance’ of parents that was seen as key, rather than the development of parenting itself (Jordon 1974: 26).

The end of autonomy

Discussing modern day panics in Britain and America, Joel Best argued that, ‘by the turn of the millennium, it was hard to identify many successful social problems campaigns mounted in either country solely by conservative claimsmakers’ (Waiton 2008: x). This change can be seen with reference to the family, or with what we now discuss as ‘families’. As gay marriage becomes not only legalised but promoted by the Conservative Prime Minister and Mayor of London it is clear that traditional morality is not the force it once was. In both politics and social policy we find little sense of an ‘institution’ being defended, and talk of The Family has largely been replaced by the concern about ‘parenting’. However, as Furedi notes, the decline of traditional morality associated with the family has not meant a decline in moralising and anxiety about families. Indeed the reverse appears to have happened, with ‘virtually every social problem’ becoming associated with poor parenting. Added to this, the inflated importance given to parenting (or parental determinism) as the cause and solution to social problems, has resulted in ‘all parents’ being seen as potential problems (Furedi 2014: ix).

This growing problematisation and professionalization of parenting has come, Reece argues, with what Furedi (1997) and Heartfield (2002) have described as the diminishing of subjectivity. Helen Reece examining family law defines the modern framework for legal developments within the family as ‘post-liberal’. Here she notes that not only has the conservative moral framework surrounding the family declined but so too has the liberal sense of autonomy, privacy and responsibility that was the founding essence of the ideal ‘bourgeois’ family.

In her various studies of the post-liberal subject Helen Reece illustrates the way the liberal subject is now conceptualised and critiqued in key political and social theories. In *Divorcing Responsibly* (2003), for example, Reece explores a variety of influential thinkers who have challenged the idea of the liberal subject, from Anthony Giddens to Catherine McKinnon, Charles Taylor and Amitai Etzioni. Rather than there being such a thing as individuals with free will, subjectivity is understood within these theories to be socially constructed, not simply in terms of individuals being merely influenced by other

people and events, but to our very core and sense of self, we are, these theorists argue, the product of external forces and relationships. The problem they have is that taken to its logical conclusion this understanding of the subject means that the individual self or agent disappears, as does the idea that we can be responsible, as individuals, for anything. To resolve this extreme representation of the totally passive individual, Reece argues, the idea of the post-liberal subject has emerged. This post-liberal person is neither a subject-less being, but nor is he or she an autonomous agent either. Rather this new subject is one that is constantly developing through continuous interactions and reflection – especially in the personal realm (Reece 2003: 13-39).

Rather than (conservative) morality and the liberal subject governing relationships in UK family policies, Reece argues, we now have the post-liberal approach, one that draws back from the idea that individuals are simply responsible for their own actions and instead understands that we are inter-subjects, subjects constantly constituted through our interactions with others, and consequently, individuals who need to have conversations with one another. Crucially though, these conversations are not simply between individuals but are to be encouraged, supported and facilitated by (often therapeutic) experts.

Reece sees the 1982 *Law Commission Report on Illegitimacy* as an important milestone when, as the report argued, ‘the concept of parental rights, in the sense of conferring on the parent control over the person...reflects an outdated view of family life which has no part to play in a modern system of law’ (Reece 2006: 463). Through the 1980s this understanding became more significant, with the idea of children’s rights and welfare seen as being increasingly significant in law, while the notion of parental authority or family autonomy dwindled. In the 1991 Criminal Justice Act we had an interesting development, where for the first time parents were held directly responsible for their children’s crimes rather than financially liable for the crimes of the children. Essentially, parents were here being held individually responsible for something that they could not necessarily control, while at the same time having their position of responsibility/authority within the home diluted.

The idea of parental responsibility in 1990, Reece believes still had some meaning in terms of parental authority, embodying ideas of freedom of parents from government. But as case law developed and new practices emerged amongst professionals and experts, the idea of parental authority was whittled away, while the ideas of parental rights and responsibility similarly declined or came to mean something very different.

Parenting was reconceptualised as something that was not governed by moral codes of right and wrong but was essentially a process governed by compassion, openness and emotional literacy. The responsible post-liberal subject ‘is judged not by what he or she does but by how he or she approaches his or her actions’ (Reece 2003: 209). There was no longer a right way to parent, rather good parenting became an attitude, most significantly, this attitude was predicated upon ‘being prepared to learn’ (Reece 2006: 470). Rather than the family being, in many respects, a private unit with its own authority,

it became a place where responsible behaviour was expected and legally demanded, backed up by an expectation of learning parents opening up and illustrating that they had the ‘right attitude’.

The right attitude of this post-liberal parent is to ask for advice. Seeking advice, as the *Supporting Families* document explains, is responsible behaviour. In other words, the ‘moral agent has become someone who accepts that he or she needs lessons in how to approach moral dilemmas’ (Reece 2003: 154) Indeed a moral agent or unit (like the ‘autonomous family’) who believes that they do not need expert instruction has become problematic: A fiction, in the eyes of post-liberal thinkers, a delusion of grandeur that acts as a barrier to necessary support that professionals can bring.

Amoral Anxiety

As the morally autonomous family declines as an ideal, and as something that is expected or indeed desired, anxiety has grown about the need to support ‘post-liberal’ parents ever earlier with their parenting. Indeed in Scotland new legislation has been passed giving every child a state ‘named person’ to over-see their interests, from birth.^{iv} Often framed within a ‘liberal’ desire to support parents, the early intervention framework is predicated upon a diminished sense of parental capacity. Consequently, despite focus, in practice, often remaining on poorer families, the trend is for the ‘panic’ or anxiety about parenting to be generalised – or normalised – and for state institutions to construct policy around this diminished, post-liberal subject.

Early intervention policies and initiatives have also emerged within a context where concerns about ‘risk’ and ‘risk focused prevention’ have become influential (Farrington 2002). Here anxieties about parents and families are expressed not through the language of morality, but ‘through the language of health, science and risk’ (Furedi 2011: 96), or ‘discourses of ‘risk’ and ‘harm’’ (Hunt 2003: 166). As Lee notes, unable to develop a coherent moral ideal or sense of purpose, the authorities have adopted an approach aimed at ‘reducing and managing risk’: The aim of moral improvement or the ideal of moral responsibility, is here replaced by the ersatz value or norm of ‘keeping us safe’ from harm (Lee et al 2014: 14).

The ‘scientific’ basis for early intervention is provided by the use (and abuse) of neuroscience. Despite growing criticism of the illegitimate use of this science, early intervention as a core policy objective continues to grow in significance (Bruer 1999, Wastell and White 2012, Gillies 2013). Where part and parcel of the Victorian moral movements or indeed the liberal approach by individual’s like John Stuart Mill, was to challenge and develop the beliefs of adults in society, today, early interventionists are preoccupied merely with our behaviour: Then the concern was with the human mind today our interventions are reduced to concerns about the biological brain (Tallis 2012).^v Within this modern day determinism, not a million miles away from the craniology of the nineteenth century, the understanding of humanity, of childhood, families, neighbourhoods and even society itself is reduced to an analysis of neurons.

Conclusion

The enthusiasm for early intervention can appear as a new form of dynamism in society, a new sense of purpose amongst professionals and a new framework for meaning and the development of grand projects. However, predicated upon the idea that if we do not intervene in a child's life (who has had some difficulties), before the age of three, then it is too late, early intervention is better understood as the outcome of a collapse of belief. Biological determinism was influential in the nineteenth century (Lombroso 2009), but at the same time there were competing ideas and beliefs about how to transform individuals and society. Belief in religion, or the liberal individual, or indeed of the possibility of socialism all embodies a sense of human capacity, of moral or social advancement. Similarly, with the development of the state in the twentieth century there has been at different times a passion for education, for social and youth work, or even for prisons, as institutions that could uplift young people and even rehabilitate adults. Today, through the prism of early intervention and the 'myth' of the first three years (Breur 1999) all of these forms of political, moral, individual or collective improvement are lost.

The early years framework has serious implications for the understanding of individuals and their capacity to overcome difficulties. As well as reflecting a diminished sense of the capacity for institutions, elites and beliefs to have an impact on children over the age of three, it also suggests that individuals themselves lack the capacity to change and to develop as they grow. The diminished post-liberal self is discovered in the early years interventionists who are convinced, especially with the help of brain science that after a 'bad' first few years of life the individual is doomed to a life of antisocial behaviour (Allen and Smith 2008).

This panic about young children and their families, expressed through a scientific and risk based framework of early intervention, in many respects, is built upon an opposition to or at least a sense of unease about old fashioned traditional family values: Values that can be seen as extreme, dogmatic, rigid, authoritarian, and in terms of the therapeutic idea of 'well-being',^{vi} potentially abusive. It likewise reacts to the ideal of autonomy and the independence of the family – a problematic place and space that takes place 'behind closed doors' and away from the ever growing importance of professional 'support' and intervention.

Today the family is less an institution around which moral panics can be located, than a new site for amoral elite anxieties to be expressed and the diminished subject to be kept safe.

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ⁱ With reference to the term 'panic', in many respects, the institutional and normalised aspect of amoral panics means that the concept panic in many respects is not entirely appropriate. Anxiety and the idea of amoral anxieties is perhaps more accurate a term, but as a device to illustrate a contrast with the idea of moral panics the term amoral panics will be used in this paper.

ⁱⁱ The list includes: Supporting Families (1998) Every Child Matters (2003), Reaching Out: An Action Plan on Social Exclusion (2006), Parenting Support (2006), Every Parent Matters (2007), Think Family (2008), Support for All: The Families and Relationships Green Paper (2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ See http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.direct.gov.uk/en/n11/newsroom/dg_066880 [accessed 12 November 2011]

^{iv} See http://www.thinkscotland.org/thinkpolitics/articles.html?read_full=12373 [accessed 24th June 2014]

^v See the Guardian article by Raymond Tallis at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/02/brain-scans-innermost-thoughts> [accessed 24th June 2014].

^{vi} See the Scottish Government's understanding of well-being at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright/background/wellbeing> [accessed 24th June 2014].