News and the Social Construction of Risky Girls

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Abstract

Early twenty-first century North American journalists often claim that social changes such as women's liberation and civil rights have had a dark side for girls. For supposedly abandoning the safety of their traditional role in the home, girls are disproportionately characterized as being at risk of victimization, while also being increasingly cast as risks to themselves and others. Using mixed-methods content analysis, this article demonstrates that the social construct of risky girls crystallized for Toronto news after the 1997 murder of Reena Virk in British Columbia through a raced, classed, and gendered moral panic over bad girls. Discourses changed from talk of youth violence before the murder to talk of risky girls after it. By conflating victimization with offending, risky girl discourses prioritize risk management over needs. This conflation results in the increased policing and incarceration of girls and youth of color, ultimately reinforcing social inequalities like racism and patriarchy.

Keywords

bad girls, Canada, content analysis, moral panic, relational aggression, risk society, risky girls, violence.

Introduction

In British Columbia, on 14 November 1997, seven girls and one boy, aged between 14 and 16 years, beat 14 year-old Reena Virk to near death. Virk attempted to escape her assailants, but two of them—Warren Glowatski and Kelly Ellard—followed her, administered a second beating, dragged her unconscious body under the bridge where she was first beaten, and drowned her. Virk's body was found eight days later (Jiwani 2006).

As a girl of South Asian decent, Virk's mostly white, middle-class, female offenders had targeted her because of her race and perceived lack of stereotypical femininity, which had "led to her marginality and vulnerability to violence" (Jiwani 2006: 69). Racist and sexist ideologies not only fuelled the violence Virk suffered, but they also motivated press coverage that accused

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Virk of bringing the violence on herself. Virk's murder generated an unprecedented local, national, and international media panic that initially framed the killing as an example of girls' increasing badness (Barron and Lacombe 2005; Jiwani 2006; Schissel 2006; Barron 2011). Meda Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin (2008) explain that "the 'bad girl' hypothesis is that the women's movement has a 'dark' side, encouraging girls and women to seek equality in the illicit world of crime as well as the licit labor market" (13). Journalists use the notion of risk to support the bad girl hypothesis, arguing that the social changes incurred through modernity, such as women's liberation, civil rights, and the development of the Internet, have put girls in social situations they are unequipped to manage. In this way, news contradictorily and disproportionately depicts girls as risks to themselves and others, as well as being at increased risk of becoming victims.

Since this framing constructs women's liberation as the main source of girlhood's supposed increased riskiness, news reports paternalistically recommend various forms of immobilization, such as keeping girls at home, at school, or in prison in the name of their protection from and for the public. Instead, however, this girlhood construct that Christie Barron (2011) calls the risky girl—girls *as* and *at* disproportionate risk—promotes girls' social exclusion through claims that "girls' situation is so bleak on the outside that this place of immobilization also functions as a place of safety" (185). As a future oriented model of protection, the risky girl paradigm targets girls more for their imagined potential to harm or be harmed than anything they have already done. Indeed, it is the future that is most concerning in a risk paradigm, since risks can only be imagined and avoided; they are never material (Beck 1992).

Framing the problem around risk, news reports, for the most part, constructed Virk as having asked for the violence inflicted on her by attempting to fit in where she did not belong. News reports cast what they called Virk's plain appearance, her dark skin, hair, height, and weight as unusual and unfeminine. Also, news reports often claimed that Virk had instigated the violence by, among other things, supposedly having sex with a boyfriend of one of the girls, and spreading rumors about another. For this, and because of her history of running away from home, news media portrayed Virk as a troubled teen and an outcast among her peers who had ultimately asked for the violence (Jiwani 2006).

In contrast, news reports cast Virk's offenders, particularly Kelly Ellard, as unlikely perpetrators. Jiwani asserts that Ellard's white middle-class status was a source of surprise, anxiety, and preoccupation that journalists used to

construct Ellard as a fallen but recoverable citizen. Journalists also often speculated with astonishment and titillation that Virk's murder might have been gang-related, and often referred to the event as a "bully-swarming" *(The Toronto Star*, 11 November 1997: G3). News reports typically use the term "swarming" to describe and dehumanize gang violence by comparing gang behavior to that of an inhuman and seemingly anarchic, indiscriminate, and above all, violent swarm of bees.

News that casts blame on girls and youth of color also often prescribes their increased surveillance and social control. News coverage of the Virk case endorsed implementing zero-tolerance youth justice and school-based anti-violence policies, such as Ontario's *Safe Schools Act* (SSA) in 2001, which was passed shortly after Virk's murder. The SSA made school suspensions, expulsions, and the involvement of police mandatory for a variety of ill-defined behaviors such as verbal abuse and violence. Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2008) argue that while "zero-tolerance policies appear on the surface to be equitable solutions…youth of color, both boys and girls, have been the disproportionate targets of these enforcement efforts" (186), in ways that increase arrests of girls and youth of color and their referral to juvenile and adult court. Indeed, as Battacharjee (2003) points out, the SSA was abandoned in 2009 for its inflexibility and disproportionate targeting of minority students and students with disabilities.

Since Virk's murder, North Americans have witnessed other highly mediated cases depicting risky girls. For instance, despite the evidence of sexual harassment and violence, news reports largely constructed the suicides of Amanda Todd (2012) and Rehtaeh Parsons (2013) as "bully-cides"—a term first used by Neil Marr and Tim Field (2001) to describe suicides attributed to bullying—caused primarily by cyber-bullying enabled by the girls' own risky behaviors. Consider this representative depiction from the *Vancouver Sun*:

> The problem started when she [Todd] flashed her breasts in front of a webcam.... The person on the other end later threatened her and circulated those images online. In a similar case, Halifax RCMP announced… the arrest of two 18 year-old men in the bullying and suicide of Rehtaeh Parsons…. Parsons' family says she was bullied for months after a digital photo of her allegedly being sexually assaulted was passed around her school (Crawford 2013: n.p.).

This example demonstrates how coverage of Todd and Parsons as engaging in risky behavior depicts the victims as partially responsible. Crawford acknowledged the sexual harassment and violence experienced by both pretty, white, middle-class girls but blamed Todd's victimization on her own

risky Internet usage and overt sexuality. Crawford described Parsons' victimization without casting explicit blame on her as she did with Todd, but her use of the term "alleged" erased Parsons' sexual assault from further discussion. This erasure intimates that Parsons committed suicide largely because of her inability to cope, not with the assault that is in question, but with the bullying that followed it. While it is common journalistic practice to discuss open criminal cases using doubt-casting terms like "alleged," this custom can also harm victims, particularly sexual assault victims, by framing the case using stereotypical antifeminist scripts that construct the victim as a potential liar and the offender as the victim of false accusations. Utilizing another common doubt-casting script, news reports also often questioned the degree to which Parsons' self-inflicted intoxication had put her at risk. This risky girls framing suggests, in an appealingly simplistic, uncritical, yet ostensibly commonsensical way that, had Todd and Parsons simply behaved responsibly, they would be alive today.

As news reports increasingly claim that cyberbullying is "a national problem," the media panics over Todd, Parsons, and other recent supposed victims of bullycide have lead to new policy developments. "In response to the death of Rehtaeh Parsons, Nova Scotia has enacted…the Cyber-Safety Act [that]…empowers victims of cyberbullying…to sue those who are victimizing them, or their parents if the individuals are minors" (*The Moose Jaw Times Herald*, 12 August 2013: n.p.). As in the aftermath of the Virk murder, this knee-jerk response is one among many new measures that focus on punishing and exiling the bully to protect the public, but that does little to address the social contexts and supports that produce bullying behavior.

Thus, gendered, raced, and classed discourses of risk informed these North American moral panics—and subsequent youth justice policy development—over girls in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century. Still, research is needed that can identify what catalyzed the discursive use of girls as risky in Canadian news reports. The extant research of the post-Virk murder moral panic mostly analyzes media discourses on the Virk case specifically, but none has examined how discourses on youth aggression changed at the time of the Virk murder (see Jiwani 2006; Batacharya 2010). Moreover, Barron (2011) posits that "there have been few attempts by risk theorists to ground their work in empirical data" (20). To address these empirical gaps, I use mixed-methods content analysis to demonstrate the discursive shift from talk of youth violence before the Virk murder, to that of risky girls after it. Mobilized through a moral panic framework over bad girls, news scripts for talking about girls' aggression through risk management

crystallized at this time and continue to inform discourses and policy development on youth aggression presently. These scripts rely on and reinforce the empirically unfounded beliefs that girls are more of a risk and at risk than boys and, therefore, require immediate and heightened surveillance and control.

Theoretical Framework

Aggression manifests through a variety of overt and covert hostile behaviors (Olweus 2013). Violent aggression includes overt physical acts of violence, such as punching, kicking, and sexual assault. Relational aggression includes non-physically violent covert and sometimes overt acts, such as social exclusion, rumor-mongering, sexual harassment, and other acts that intimidate, isolate, and humiliate the person targeted. To reinforce the social construction of hetero-normative white femininity, news reports tend to masculinize violent and overt aggression and feminize relational and covert aggression. Nicole Pietsch (2010) argues that "the popular notion that girls exhibit 'a distinctly feminine and indirect form of aggression, entirely different from that of boys'"(410) relies on powerful identities of white-identified middle-class girlhood. Citing Jessica Ringrose, Pietsch argues that "such girlhood violence…signifies a cultural emergency. For…white girls…to enact a brash departure from acceptable gendered behaviour is deeply problematic: an 'overt aggression' that disrupts the passive, 'normative nice-mean continuum of the feminine'" (254). Thus, through the criteria of heteronormative white femininity, news reports characterize girls' use of aggression as risky to support their supposed need of increased surveillance, policing, and immobilization. While news reports characterize covert and relational aggression as the only possible forms of aggression accessible to girls, its use by girls is still represented as duplicitous and bad, "nice on the outside but venomous and manipulative on the inside" (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008: 21). This gendered dichotomy, which is strictly reinforced through social structures, exclusively characterizes girls as mean and secretive risky subjects whose use of overt aggression is masculine and therefore unnatural.

Risk society discourses like that of the risky girl ensure that "[t]he *commonality of anxiety* takes the place of the *commonality of need*…in which *solidarity from anxiety* arises and becomes a political force" (Beck 1992: 49 emphasis in original). Risk is actuarial in that it must be managed through identification, measurement, and prediction. The emphasis on actuarial risk

collapses the divergent acts of being victimized and harming someone by making individuals accountable for their own risk management (Barron 2011). Indeed, the risky girl is framed as the gendered, raced, and classed antithesis of what Beck (1992) calls the responsible citizen, who is the imagined white, middle-class member of the public made responsible for maintaining his or her own safety and the safety of others in North America's current neo-liberal capitalist state. By contrast, risk discourses depict victims as failed citizens for not having taken the proper precautions against the "risks and consequences of modernization" (13). The risky girl framing, then, characterizes aggressive boys as rational actors who seize opportunities made possible by girls' risky behaviors. Indeed, risk discourses depict girls as unsympathetic victims and offenders in cases where they are deemed to have failed to perform heteronormative, white femininity. News reports strongly recommend risky girls' re-socialization, their increased social control, and, in many cases, their exile from society.

One way in which news coverage mobilizes risk discourses is through moral panic. Much like risk discourses, "moral panics function to maintain social hierarchies, 'secur[ing] patriarchy and white supremacy by way of heroic masculinity aimed at "protection" (meaning control) of white girls and women'" (Batacharya 2006: 182, cited in Pietsch 2010: 251). Indeed, Barron and Lacombe (2005) argue that moral panic has produced a gendered, raced, and classed new folk devil in the 1990s. According to Stanley Cohen (1987), folk devils are the symbolic, stereotypic, and socially constructed agents of social harm that are a major feature of moral panics. During a moral panic, folk devils gain heightened media attention after a significant, morally disturbing event catches public interest and, with the support of select moral, academic, and political leaders, these texts are repeated until they become commonsensical. "The Nasty Girl" is one of many labels attached to the new folk devil from the 1990s, along with "The Bad Girl," and more recently, "The Mean Girl." The risky girl, however, is not a folk devil: she is instead the underlying and unspoken girlhood construct that makes these folk devils possible.

Because moral panics focus on the most superficial aspects of the problem, they act as barriers to addressing its deeper nature and/or causes. To combat this, public criticism of moral panic is an increasingly common practice in Western media. Since the mid 1980s, critical journalists and other media-based insurgents have created counter-frames in the news to oppose the deployment of moral panic frameworks. While counter-frames criticize moral panics for exaggerating social problems, they also reframe the problem

and emphasize the need for measured remedies that target root social causes (Altheide 2009). Here, I analyze a Canadian news-based counter-frame in *The Toronto Star*'s coverage of youth aggression after the Virk murder. I compare this coverage to the raced, gendered, and classed Toronto-based moral panic published alongside it that depicted girls as risky subjects and led to their being subjected to increased social control. The following section outlines and explains my mixed-methods approach to analyzing this late 1990s example of Canadian moral panic over risky girls.

Methods

This article investigates coverage of youth aggression at the time of the Virk murder by *The Toronto Sun* (hereafter referred to as *The Sun*) and *The Toronto Star* (hereafter referred to as *The Star*).[1] I analyze how the case's coverage influenced the discourses of youth justice news and policy making nationally—at a distance from British Columbia where the crime and trials took place—in two Toronto-based news sources with national and international content. I demonstrate that the newspapers' international content put these Toronto-based news discourses and related policy development in conversation with the wars on youth gangs, Gangsta girls, bad girls, and other gendered and raced moral panics occurring in the US and, to a lesser extent, in the UK in the late twentieth century.

For comparative analysis, I collected news articles from six months before Virk's murder (14 May 1997), until one year after it (14 November 1998). Using *LexisNexis*, I searched for articles in each newspaper that included the terms: bully; bullying; youth violence; youth aggression; boy; girl; youth; gang; Reena Virk; and violent kid. This yielded 126 results without assuming a bias for gender or moral panic in reporting. Open coding uncovered four primary categories of article topics: boys' aggression; girl's aggression; gender-neutral youth aggression; and youth justice policies or programs. I then mapped the rate of news attention to youth aggression before and after Virk's murder using quantitative analysis (see Fyfe 2011).

Qualitatively, I analyzed the influence of the murder of Virk on Toronto news discourses around youth aggression, excluding extremely short articles and articles directly discussing the case from further content analysis. This yielded 56 articles (44 percent of the total): 11 (or 20 percent) of the remaining articles were published before Virk's murder, while 45 (or 80 percent) were published during the following 12 months. Drawing on Robert

Entman's (2003) approach to frame analysis, I analyzed how the articles set and promoted particular agendas, or what we call news frames, on girls and aggression by defining the problem(s), diagnosing the cause(s), making moral judgment(s), and suggesting remedies. All four parts of a news frame are not necessarily present in a single article, but instead cohere across multiple articles (Entman 2003). My mixed methodologies revealed both the magnitude of changes in news coverage of youth aggression after the Virk murder as well as providing a critical framework through which to evaluate the discursive construction of risky girls over this time of transition.

Framing Risky Girls

I observed a qualitative and quantitative discursive shift from youth violence to risky girls in Toronto-based news during the 18-month period around Reena Virk's 1997 murder. In the six months before the event, journalists used a gender-neutral Prevention Frame to report on youth aggression. Fifteen reports cohered to characterize youth violence and gang membership as moderate social problems; they recommended a community and youth-lead prevention/treatment model. Immediately following Virk's murder, however, 80 news articles on youth aggression cohered into what I call the Bad Girls Frame. The supposed rising rates of girls' violence and gang membership became the new journalistic youth justice concern, garnering 53 percent (43 of 80) of the news articles from 14 November 1997 until 13 May 1998, and 23 percent (7 of 31) from 14 May 1998 until 13 November 1998. These results are particularly significant considering that girl-specific aggression received no coverage prior to Virk's murder.

Post-Virk murder news coverage characterized aggressive girls as bad, worse than boys, and as a risk to the status quo. This framing blamed girls and feminism almost exclusively for this supposed mass change in behavior, evacuating any larger contextual analyses of why and under what conditions some girls may be using aggression. News stories called for the use of increased social control measures against youth as a response to perceived increases in girl-specific aggressive incidents.

Attention shifted slightly over the 12-month period following Virk's murder from girls' aggression to youth justice policies and programming. The observed discursive shift from the problem to the solution is expected in a moral panic framework and is indicative of its influence on social change (Cohen 1987). Although journalistic attention to youth (especially girls')

aggression waned during the 12 months following the murder, it remained a newsworthy topic in a way that it had not been before the event, suggesting that this moral panic framework altered the discursive boundaries of youth aggression for the Toronto-based press analyzed here.

A novel discovery is the existence of the Anti-panic Frame after the Virk murder. Observed in *The Star* only and constituting 5 percent (4 of 80) of the sample, the Anti-panic Frame reframed the personal problems offered by the Bad Girls Frame—such as girl-on-girl violence—within a contextual paradigm that takes into account root social issues such as racism and patriarchy. The Bad Girls Frame severely marginalized the Anti-panic Frame through the disproportionate quantity, length, and positioning of the supporting articles. Indeed, the major frames (that is, the Bad Girls Frame and the Prevention Frame) were found most frequently and were commonly authored by staff news reporters in the News section and other high status and readership sections. Authored by a commentator and a Saturday columnist, the minor frame (that is, the Anti-panic Frame) was found less frequently in the Life and Opinion sections of *The Star*. These sections typically publish stories associated with a range of feminized and domesticized issues. These sections are where social problems such as family and intimate partner abuse get covered alongside such topics as gardening, fashion, and dating advice.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Canadian youth justice policies and programs that came into effect following this risk-centered moral panic—such as Ontario's SSA—better reflected the retributive youth justice model of the Bad Girls Frame than the prevention/treatment models proposed in the two alternative frames. Although Schissel (2006) notes that Canadian journalists have been calling for harsher youth justice policies since at least the late 1980s, my findings suggest that the moral panic over bad girls analyzed here was a major contributor to the nature and timing of these policy changes. Indeed, the Canadian federal government admits in a recent legislative summary that it modifies youth justice legislation, in part, because of news coverage (Parliament of Canada 2012). Although the authors acknowledged in the same document that youth crime is in decline, they instituted the policy changes anyway because headlines reported that the public was feeling "concerned" (124). As Beck (1992) argues, the prioritization of public anxieties over needs is definitive of a risk society. To better evaluate the nature of the Toronto news-based discursive shift from youth violence to risky girls in the late 1990s, I now turn to my qualitative analysis of the three news frames observed in the sample, beginning with the pre-Virk Prevention Frame.

The Prevention Frame

Before Virk's murder, mainstream Toronto-based youth justice news coverage focused on youth violence and gang membership, typically describing these problems as moderate, and endorsing a community-based prevention and treatment model. Journalists using this frame reported a relatively stable rate of youth violence, but often claimed that pre-teen juveniles were becoming more violent and using "more serious weapons" (*The Star*, 11 November 1997: G3) than in the past. Conversely, this news discourse also claimed that youth, as journalist Elaine Carey (1997) put it, become "less violent with age" (A3), suggesting that youth age out of being violent and mature into using relationally aggressive behavior.

This frame also characterized youth gang violence as a moderate social problem, a finding consistent with research demonstrating that youth gangs are a popular topic in Canadian news (see Schissel 2006). Reports claimed that youth gang offences included acts such as extortion; intimidation; armed robbery; uttering threats; and even causing youth suicides. Although youth gangs were newsworthy at this time, their coverage was neither alarmist nor gendered, and it discouraged knee-jerk assumptions of blame. Still, Schissel (2006) cautions that, "ultimately, 'gang' becomes a racist code word in the media to refer to Aboriginal and immigrant kids" (95). Thus, while this framing resists gendering its problem population, its focus on youth gangs covertly racializes the perceived youth violence problem.

News coverage provided a variety of social and individual causes for the reported rise in adolescent violence. Journalists typically contextualized individual sources of youth violence like poor coping skills within larger social frameworks such as racism, classism, and sexism. According to one story: "Kelly Yeomans[']…only sin was being fat…She was so hurt [by bullying], it seems, that on Sept. 28 she took a fatal overdose of painkillers…. How tragic. How mean and heartless" (Cairns 1997: 12). In this example, Cairns described the suicide of 13 year-old Kelly Yeomans in England on 28 September 1997. While he characterized Yeomans' harassment by other youth as "mean and heartless," he contextualized it as an example of aggression rooted in systemic intolerance toward overweight individuals. To combat this intolerance, Cairns endorsed "[sensitizing] other children—and adults too—to the fact that fat people are not the comic characters or lazy stereotypes everyone sees them as, but real people" (Cairns 1997). Cairns discussed the victimization of Yeomans using gender-neutral and often age-inclusive words like children, people, and adults, providing some evidence that

Toronto-based journalists were not particularly concerned about risky girls prior to the Virk murder.

To better ameliorate individual circumstances that can lead youth to commit violence, news reports proposed multidimensional remedies that target root social causes such as stress. According to one story, "[T]here's no reason we can't provide everyone with resources to help them do a better job [of coping with stress]" (*The Star*, 11 November 1997: G3). To help troubled youth learn alternatives to violence, journalists recommended more treatment and social programs as well as a stronger police and parental presence in young people's lives. Journalists also promoted children's involvement and leadership in community and school-based anti-violence programs. In the following section, I demonstrate that the framing of youth aggression in Toronto news drastically changed after the Virk murder to become much more intolerant, punitive, and girl-focused.

The Bad Girls Frame

The Bad Girls Frame promoted moral panic over girls' violence and gang membership by exaggerating the severity of the problem. For instance, post-Virk news coverage revealed significant reporting on violence by girl gangs and girl gang members. According to *The Star* (24 October 1998), which conducted its own study on youth gangs in the Greater Toronto Area during May, June, and July of 1998, girl gangs made up 5 of the area's 180 gangs.

Yet *The Star*'s reports on this study masculinized girl gang members by characterizing them as more violent and out of control than boy gang members, primarily through the use of anecdotes and so-called expert witnesses. For instance, in the following news extract a male North York Catholic school student and a female Toronto Constable act as expert informants on the state of Toronto's girl gang violence:

> "Oh they're killers. They're worse than us [boys]. I wouldn't go near them," [the student] says… "Girl gangs are... crazy." …. Toronto Constable Wendy Gales, of 54 Division in former East York, says female violence is often the most severe (Shephard 1998: A18).

Pietsch (2010) asserts that, while gender-specific moral panics are typically overtly sexist and heterosexist, "whiteness (and additional categories such as class privilege) remains implicit" (251). By normalizing whiteness, these journalistic anxieties over bad girls were clearly anxieties over white girls acting like white boys, or, worse, like Others. One headline reads: "When girls

go bad: Toronto cops fear upswing in U.S.-style girl gang violence" (Lamberti 1998: 23). Barron (2011) explains that:

> In the early 1990s, there was attention on the "gangster girl," who was always a young woman of colour but "the last half of the 1990s continued this 'bad girl' discourse, with an added focus on white girls' aggression as an undiscovered, concealed culture'" (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004: 31 cited 13).

Thus, news reports also often indirectly racialized girl gang members by conflating Toronto youth gangs with negative Hollywood-inspired depictions of African American and Latino Cultures. For instance, Shephard (1998) argues later that "the new wave of organized youth gangs in Toronto appeared in the late 1980s against a backdrop of 'Gangsta' rap and the growing notoriety of drive-by shootings in south-central Los Angeles" (A18). The examples above demonstrate how the Bad Girls Frame masculinizes and racializes youth gang members (particularly girls) by prioritizing heteronormative white femininity and associating Toronto's youth gangs with late twentieth century American media panics.

To support the assertion that girls are increasingly turning to violence, journalists often cited atypical and extreme examples of female offenders like the girls involved in Virk's murder. According to a story published in *The Sun* on 26 January1998,

> [t]he five [Spadina Girls] all 15 [years-old] …[were] just the latest in a wave of such [violent] appearances by girls. In the same week, a 17 year-old Kitchener girl was charged with beating, confining and torturing a 14 year-old girl. And in recent months, seven girls were charged in the murder of Victoria teen Reena Virk. Two teen girls were charged with murdering a woman at a Saskatchewan young offender facility. A 13 year-old London, Ont. Girl was charged with trying to kill a 9 year-old boy. The list goes on (14).

Although these incidents of violence are horrifying, they are neither representative nor common. This tactic of statistical misrepresentation fuels moral panic by offering each new example as proof of the problem's existence and its impacts, despite the fact that, as Fishman (1978) among many others points out, individual examples do not characterize a trend.

Findings also revealed the powerful journalistic strategy of using expert witnesses to distort or contradict statistics on youth crime. Journalists often argued that crime statistics are less accurate depictions of social problems than anecdotes strategically provided by police chiefs, academics, as well as victims and offenders of youth aggression. For example, "while statistics vary… anecdotal evidence suggests girls are getting meaner and scarier. In other words, never mind the stats—when teen girls are killing, torturing

and 'machete-swarming,' it's time to take notice" (*The Sun*, 26 January 1998: 14). Not only does this journalist engage the racializing and dehumanizing term swarming to describe girls' violence, but, in doing so, also recalls the popular journalistic description of Virk's murder as a bully-swarming. This journalist also rejects the lack of empirical evidence of the growing badness of girls by embellishing the risks posed by girls' violence with racialized and gendered images of counter-insurgency. When journalists compare girls' behaviours to those of popular Hollywood and televised counter-insurgents with their use of machetes, their killing, and their employment of torture during war and civil unrest, the girls' imagined use of violence is linked to the domination of other girls (or, worse, boys) through power and force, a phenomenon the Bad Girls Frame characterizes as risky. Indeed, describing the problem as girl power gone awry, news reports often reproachfully claimed that girls used violence to attain power and male attention or approval. By way of example, one story argued the following: "What do [aggressive girls] use that power for? Why, to attract boys, of course. … In the [girl] code, sexual rivalry is seen as an obvious reason to duke it out" (Mandel 1997: 40–41). Here, Mandel uses patriarchal logic to locate the source of this violence within girls' perceived insecurities, aspirations for power, and heterosexual desires. Societal anxieties over girl power and sexuality like those expressed in this frame are a "projection of a desire to retrieve a patriarchal social order characterized by gender conformity" (Barron and Lacombe 2005: 65). Thus, the Bad Girls Frame promotes anxiety over girl power to reinforce the risky girl discourses that cast girls as a risk to the status quo. In one story, journalist Linda Williamson aligns herself with Canadian journalist Patricia Pearson's thesis in her book (re-issued a year later with a new epilogue that links her arguments with what happened to Virk in what appears to be an I-told-you-so sort of wrap up), *When She Was Bad: How and Why Women Get Away with Murder* ([1997]1998).

> [This book] is an enthusiastic refuting of the "myth of innocence," which Pearson says is just a feminist spin on the old sexist stereotype of girls as "sugar and spice and everything nice." …. She presents plenty of evidence that, in fact, women are equally [as] evil [as men]—but routinely given more lenience in court (Williamson 1997: 16).

Williamson later expresses doubt about the validity of analyzing female violence contextually, as recommended by Sibylle Artz, a Canadian expert on girls' violence. "Artz, in an interview with *Macleans*, says a violent girl has 'very likely been subjected to physical violence... [by] her father, who ... is

controlling and physically violent.' (There we go again, blaming a man)," says Williamson (1997: 16).

Rehabilitation programs and early crime intervention and prevention programs can reduce crime rates of new and repeat violent and non-violent young offenders alike (Mitchell 2012). Although recommendations for such programs were common, news reports most often recommended harsher penalties like longer prison sentences for violent and repeat young offenders. Thus, the dominant news frame post-Virk endorsed punishing and controlling aggressive girls to moderate the perceived increased risk they posed to the status quo. Ultimately, this risk discourse makes girls and the imagined white middle-class public responsible for maintaining safety for and against risky girls. While the dominant news frame after the Virk murder held girls responsible for nearly all the violence in their lives, another frame—the Anti-panic Frame—also emerged to challenge it, offering a more empirically and socially responsible way of conceiving of the youth aggression problem.

The Anti-panic Frame

In this section, I demonstrate the existence of the Anti-panic Frame—the marginalized counter-frame found in *The Star*. To challenge the media's misrepresentation of the problem, this frame often invoked the notion of moral panic using alternative but familiar language: "A government that whips up the public's fears in order to exploit them is itself a government to be feared" (Landsberg 1998: L1). Fueling panic, scapegoating, and whipping up fears stand as synonyms for moral panic in this early example of a Canadian counter-frame.

Proponents of this frame such as Kim Pate, an advocate for girls and women, criticized the popular framing of the problem of youth aggression as a girls' problem, and provided alternative information and experts. Indeed, Pate (1997) refers to award-winning feminist criminologist and advocate for girls, Meda Chesney-Lind, to better describe the bad girls hypothesis and further discredit media reports that use it. "In the 1990s, [Chesney-Lind] says, we are in the midst of a second wave [of antifeminism] that causally links women's equality with the participation of girls—especially poor, minority girls—in gangs" (F3)—a hypothesis that Pate and Chesney-Lind argue is not supported by facts.

Authors of this frame cautioned readers to read and evaluate critically popular news coverage that often exaggerates the severity and frequency of

girls' violence using misleading crime statistics or evocative anecdotes. According to Pate (1997), "every time … [a young woman commits a violent offence] journalists and talk show hosts beat the bushes for other examples to support extreme interpretations of the event" (F3). Examples of girls' violence are not sufficient evidence of an increasing trend, yet, as demonstrated in the Bad Girls Frame, media often present them as evidence of statistical inaccuracy.

Anti-panic proponents also asserted that youth aggression, while not as severe a problem as indicated in the dominant framing, is still a complex problem that must be addressed through a justice model that prioritizes prevention, social change, and treatment. Pate asserts that "[t]here is sufficient evidence that preventative approaches to addressing crime within the context of socio-economic, gender, racial, and ethno-cultural realities are far more cost effective than current criminal justice approaches" (1997: F3). Landsberg and Pate both agree that feminist and women-centered approaches to youth justice and education are direly needed. Thus, the Anti-panic Frame recommended that schools embrace feminist values to actively resist structural oppressions such as racism and sexism that are often celebrated and endorsed through Canada's public and private education systems.

Conclusion

Toronto news went from talk of a moderate youth and gang violence before Virk's murder to a moral panic over bad girls after it. Despite the Anti-panic Frame's counter-narrative, the Bad Girls Frame dominated the post-Virk journalistic discussion on youth aggression, ultimately characterizing girlhood as disproportionately risky to the status quo. Appearing increasingly commonsensical in twenty-first century news reports, the risky girl paradigm limits the available frameworks of analysis with which to analyze and approach girls' aggression to individualizing narratives that sacrifice girls' needs, autonomy, and personhood in the name of their protection. These racialized, gendered, and classed scripts reinforce the social hierarchies on which they were formed whilst penalizing and controlling girls and youth of color. Ultimately, these scripts act as barriers to understanding and responding to girls' experiences as victims and offenders as being different.

The recent upsurge of attention to the cyber-bullying of girls summarized in my introduction also relies on the risky girl paradigm. Although the cyber-bullying of and by girls has surpassed girls' violence in the current

construction of North America's major youth justice concern, the risky girl hypothesis on which they both rely is founded on the empirically unsubstantiated belief that girls' aggression is covert and boys' aggression is overt, and, to compound the cliché, never the two shall meet. Journalists continue to construct girls' overt social interactions as gender inappropriate and risky behavior, which they then claim is sufficient cause for the heightened surveillance and control of girls. Future research must investigate these connections further to better identify the long-term impacts of the moral panics and counter-frame investigated here.

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Notes

1. Hackett and Uzelman (2003) characterize *The Sun* as a conservative tabloid-style newspaper and *The Star* as a liberal broadsheet. The news sources' divergent political investments and newspaper styles uncovered textual differences between the newspapers, such as the existence of a counter-frame in *The Star* only.

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