# The Rutgers DSW Program

**Module Title**: The Social Injustice of Moral Panics: Understanding the Impact on Vulnerable Populations
**Instructor**:
**Residency:** November 2018
**Date:**

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**Module Description**:
Moral Panic theory emphasizes how exaggerated accounts of particular types of social problems (and sub-populations) are used to influence public opinion, scapegoat vulnerable populations for societal insecurities, and shape reactive and discriminatory social policies. The occurrence of a moral panic does not suggest that a social problem does not exist; however, in a moral panic, the claim of threat posed by the problem is disproportionate to its actual risk and becomes sensationalized through media discourse meant to enhance hostility towards a targeted group (usually those outside the societal "mainstream") and foster consensus toward immediate action (Cohen, 1972; 2002). During moral panics, the causes of social problems are seen to lie in individualistic behavior that is often perceived to be immoral and structural causes are minimized or ignored. Policies enacted during such times typically lead to enduring political and cultural shifts that seek to further marginalize sub-populations as 'non-normal' and engender societal injustice and/or criminalization of certain behaviors (Cohen, 1972; 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). By better understanding moral panics, the structural and contextual causes of inequality become more apparent, shifting the focus away from more individualistic and/or simplistic explanations of social dysfunction (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). This focus can help social workers contextualize social problems within broader societal structures (as opposed to individual pathology), challenge rhetoric that provokes social injustice, and address the impact of unjust policies on marginalized groups.

In this module, we will explore the core elements of moral panic theory and, using a structured framework of key questions, discuss how to analyze the construction of social problems and recognize potential moral panics. We will then explore examples of how social discourse is used to enflame the dynamics of moral panics around a vulnerable sub-population (e.g., Lesbians and gay men, transgender communities, immigrants) in the United States.

**Module Objectives**:
As a result of this module, students will be able to:

1) Describe the key components of moral panic theory and discuss the theory's relevance to social work
2) Recognize and understand the impact of social discourse on the construction of social problems;
3) Identify the reactive quality of policies that disproportionately impact marginalized populations.

**Required Reading**:
1) Eversman, M. H. & Bird, J.D.P. (2017). Moral panic and social justice: A guide for analyzing Social problems. Social Work, 62(1), 29-36.
2) Goode, E., & Ben-Yahuda, N. (1994). Moral panics: Culture, politics, and social construction. Annual Review of Sociology, 20, 149-171.
3) Herdt, G. (2009). Introduction: Moral panics, sexual rights, and cultural anger. In, G. Herdt's (Ed)., Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the fight over sexual rights, pp. 1-46. New York University Press.

**Recommended Readings**
1) Adam, B. D. (2003). The Defense of Marriage Act and American Exceptionalism: The "Gay Marriage" Panic in the United States. Journal of the History of Sexuality, 1(2), 259-276.
2) Zatz, M.S., & Smith, H. (2012). Immigration, crime, and victimization: Rhetoric and reality.
Annual Review of Law and Social Science, 8, 141-159.

**Supplemental Readings**:
1) Cisneros, J.D. (2008). Contaminated communities: The metaphor of "immigrant as pollutant" in media representations of immigration. Rhetoric & Public Affairs, 11 (4), 569-602.
2) Cohen, S. (2002). Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.
3) Davies, C. (2008). Proliferating Panic: Regulating representations of sex and gender during the culture wars. Cultural Studies Review, 14(2), 83-102.
4) Fejes, F. (2000). The 1954 Media Campaign Against Miami's Homosexuals. Journal of the History of Sexuality, 9(3), 305-347.
5) Gerassi, J. (2001). The Boys of Boise: Furor, Vice and Folly in an American City. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
6) Goode, E., & Ben-Yahuda, N. (1994). Moral panics: The social construction of Deviance (2$^{nd}$ ed.). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
7) Longazel, J.G. (2012). Moral panic as racial degradation ceremony: Racial stratification and the local-level backlash against Latino/a immigrants. Punishment & Society, 15 (1), 96-119.
8) Thompson, E. (2015). Compromising Equality: An Analysis of the Religious Exemption in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and its Impact on Gay Workers. Boston College Journal of Law & Social Justice, 35(2), 285-318.