Booing or cheering? Ambiguity in the construction of victimhood in the case of Maria Colwell

IAN BUTLER AND MARK DRAKEFORD, University of Bath, UK and Cardiff University, UK

Abstract
This paper presents a microanalysis of the media representation of victimhood in key public narratives. It builds on Peelo’s account of the ‘mediated witness’ as part of the struggle for control of the crime agenda. To extend Peelo’s analysis to other areas of public policy making, the paper uses the example of an iconic welfare ‘scandal’ (the Maria Colwell case) and focuses particularly on the role of victims themselves in the struggle to own and exploit victimhood. The paper argues that ambiguity in the ascription of victimhood can reveal points of unresolved tension in the emerging public narrative that the scandal (or crime) is meant to signify, explain and incorporate.

Keywords
scandal; victimhood; mediated witness; emotionality; welfare policy; child abuse

INTRODUCTION
Moira Peelo (2006) has recently described how newspapers can contribute to the construction of the ‘social commentary’ occasioned by certain ‘signal crimes’ (Innes, 2004); in Peelo’s example, homicide. This commentary is generated through a ‘stylised dialogue made up of a collection of authorial techniques that attempt to align the reader emotionally with victimhood’ (Peelo, 2006: 160). This ‘dialogue’, which Peelo describes as ‘mediated witness’, frames events in such a way that the newspaper reader is invited to share closely in the story of the crime by ‘identifying with the emotions of those who have been hurt’ (p. 162). In this way, the offence is able to pass ‘into cultural and social awareness and contribute to the construction of a contested framework (public narrative) within which the struggle for control of the crime agenda takes place’ (p. 169).
Peelo describes how techniques of repetition, defamiliarization and objectification are deployed to achieve this ‘representation of emotionality’ (p. 163). This representation, to some degree, offsets or complements the use of the ‘shorthand symbols’ (p. 163) newspapers habitually use to interact with their readers and that help them to know when ‘to hiss and boo as the villain appears and when to identify with the good and worthy’ (p. 163). Peelo argues that the ‘exploitation and ownership of victimhood’ (p. 170) is central to the current public narrative about crime and concludes that further micro-studies of the way in which ‘our social commentary is shaped by virtual emotions arising out of manufactured victimhood’ (p. 170) will be important in a political and policy context in which the ‘uses and abuses of the emotionality surrounding crime’ (p. 171) are highly influential.

This paper is an attempt to supply such a microanalysis, albeit in an analogous context to that upon which Peelo has relied. Our interest is in the generation of the welfare ‘scandal’ as a form of public narrative rather than a particular narrative about crime, although the example that we will use, the case of Maria Colwell, as with many welfare scandals, does have a brutal crime at the heart of it. In transferring Peelo’s analysis to the scandalizing process we will also add some further reflections on the processes that produce the ‘mediated witness’. In particular, we will illustrate how differences between local and national newspapers contribute to the production of the mediated witness and, more importantly, demonstrate how in the struggle to exploit and own victimhood, the ‘victims’ may themselves exert a significant influence. This has the effect of nuancing Peelo’s account of the mediated witness and of extending her analysis to include other dimensions of public policy making.

WELFARE SCANDALS AND THE PRODUCTION OF PUBLIC POLICY

The case has been made repeatedly by academic commentators (see, for example, Reder et al., 1993; Corby, 2000; Reder and Duncan, 2004) that public policy in relation to child protection practice has been driven for almost a generation by the succession of welfare scandals with which it is most frequently associated in the mass media and the public mind. This is not the place to reflect on the cumulative effect on the quality of professional interventions in child protection that such scrutiny has produced nor on the degree of child harm the increasingly modernized, managerialist and process-driven forms of intervention may have prevented or detected, but it is important to note how a continuous focus on individual instances of failure in professional practice has served to represent child abuse as a series of specific failures in the mechanisms of child protection. This has avoided any more detailed consideration of the circumstances in which the abuse of children is generated or condoned in the first place. Critical to this process have been the apportionment of blame and the attribution of victimhood, with the child the victim and the (social work) professional, even more than the parent, as the villain of the piece.
Most recently, this has been demonstrated in the case of Victoria Climbié. Newly arrived in the UK, homeless, poor, with neither access to healthcare nor entered on a school roll, speaking little or no English, faced with racism, confusion over what constitutes cultural competence and traumatised by past events, Victoria Climbié had much in her biography that deserves our sympathy. Yet her case was not in any way unique. It is shared, for example, with any number of asylum-seeking or refugee children living in Britain today. Despite the fact that her death was neither more nor less tragic than any other child’s, nor her suffering any more acute than that of many others, it was the specific failures of those whose job it was to ‘protect’ her rather than her own wretched life and awful death that provided the opportunity for a far-reaching reform of the service infrastructure and professional ‘technology’ for delivering services to children on a scale not seen for at least 30 years.

Arguably, there has not been the same degree of interest in addressing the structural conditions in which so much harm of children takes place nor indeed of humanizing immigration law. Recent reports by UNICEF (2007) and The Primary Review (2007) would suggest that there is a great deal troubling children and young people in the UK today that improvements in the performance of Children’s Trusts won’t address. It is beyond our scope to consider whether Every Child really Matters (see HMG, 2003), at least to the same degree, but 30 years of locating the blame in failures of particular systems rather than in systemic failures may have played a part in making this an important question to ask.

In public policy terms, the ink is hardly dry on Climbié and its consequences and so, for the purposes of this article, we are going to take as our example a similarly iconic case, that of Maria Colwell, whose death in 1973 unquestionably had as much an impact on public attitudes and public policy in respect of child protection. We return, briefly, to the case of Victoria Climbié below.

Both ‘mega crimes’ (Soothill et al., 2002) and welfare scandals are species of ‘moral panic’ (Cohen, 1973) to some degree. Peelo (2006: 160) argues that newspapers and their readers together ‘restore a sense of control by confirming a viewpoint of society and its ills, and neutralize anguish’ through the stylised reportage of mega crimes. She cites Katz’ (1987: 67) ‘thesis’ that reading crime stories is a form of ‘moral workout’ in which readers ‘work out individual perspectives on moral questions of a quite general yet eminently personal relevance’ (p. 160). We have argued something similar in relation to scandals and the production of welfare policy (Butler and Drakeford, 2003, 2005; Drakeford and Butler, 2007). Here, we have suggested that the welfare scandal is also a form of iconic event. It provides a ‘site’ for the intensive and intense examination of public policy processes and outcomes that have a significance beyond the professional communities of interest and private individuals around which the scandal is built. It speaks to more general ‘social commentaries’ or moral and socio-cultural concerns. We have also described in detail the process whereby a ‘scandal’ is constructed following a recognizable, staged process from discovery to exposure and the role played by the public inquiry in making meaning out of the underlying events. Indeed, the construction of the most enduring ‘text’ of the scandal, the public inquiry report, utilises many of the narrative devices Peelo describes.
The public press can play a part at several points in the scandalizing process, from discovery or building initial momentum to explicitly catalysing change in policy. We have argued elsewhere for a more subtle understanding of the role played by the press in the construction of ‘social problems’ in general and child abuse in particular (see Butler and Drakeford, 2005: 211ff) but we recognize the importance of the iterative and reciprocal process whereby the press and its readers come to a (more or less) shared understanding of what has gone wrong and how it is to be remedied in both the mega homicide and, even more overtly, in the welfare scandal. Here, however, a more structured ‘hierarchy of censure’ (see Colwell Inquiry Report [CIR], 1974: para. 334) is usually an intended or, at least, a likely outcome. In the welfare scandal, which involves a range of public agencies and public servants, private citizens and possibly government ministers, as well as a literal, named victim and a known perpetrator, there is a wider range of possible heroes and villains to boo and hiss or to cheer. In such circumstances, where the question of accountability extends well beyond the relatively simple matter of a criminal conviction, securing the status of ‘victim’ seems to us to be a more uncertain process and one in which the victim herself has a part to play. We draw our example from the landmark child abuse scandal of Maria Colwell.

THE MEGA CASE OF MARIA COLWELL

Briefly, Maria Colwell was born in Hove, near Brighton, on the south coast of England on 25 March 1965. She was the fifth and youngest child of her mother Pauline’s marriage to Raymond Colwell, who died less than four months after Maria was born. In these difficult circumstances, at first informally, Maria came to be looked after by Raymond’s sister, Doris Cooper, and her husband. Some 10 months later, Maria spent an unsatisfactory period of less than seven days back in the care of her mother. Mrs Colwell’s resumption of the care of Maria coincided with her expressed intention to set up home with William Kepple, with whom she had begun a relationship and would marry in May 1972. However, on application by the County Council in August 1966, Maria was made the subject of a Fit Person Order (broadly equivalent to a care order today) and returned to the formal care of the Coopers.

Maria continued to live with the Coopers until October 1971, despite the frequently expressed intentions of her mother to resume the care of her daughter. The relationship between Pauline Colwell and the Coopers remained strained throughout this period. Indeed, the nature of this relationship was to have a decisive effect on the subsequent decision to return Maria to the care of her mother, who remained throughout her childhood, according to the inquiry report, ‘at the centre of conflict’ (CIR 1974: 36).

Maria was placed in the care of her mother and William Kepple on 22 October 1971. Under the intermittent and largely unco-ordinated supervision of both the local authority and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), a non-governmental agency but with some statutory powers, the inquiry found abundant evidence of a steady deterioration in Maria’s condition over the next 15 months and on the night of Saturday, 6 January 1973, William Kepple came in at 11.30 pm to find Maria watching television ‘and the events which formed the basis for the indictment...
against Mr Kepple then occurred’ (CIR 1974: 146). On post mortem examination, the majority of the injuries found on Maria’s body, described by the pathologist in the case as ‘the worst he had ever seen’, were judged to have resulted from ‘extreme violence’ (p. 147). William Kepple was convicted of Maria’s murder in April 1973, although, on appeal, the charge was reduced to manslaughter and he was sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment.

The Colwell case remains the reference point for all subsequent child abuse scandals. Even the most cursory web-search produces hundreds of contemporary ‘hits’ such that Colwell, as with all ‘mega’ stories, remains ‘an active ingredient in the construction of the public narratives by which society makes sense of major crime long after the events themselves’ (Peelo, 2006: 162). We have discussed elsewhere (Butler and Drakeford, 2003, 2005) how the widespread reporting that has crowded the years following Maria Colwell’s death has contributed to the myth as well as the reality of what took place. Thirty years later, a simple citation suffices to alert readers to the subject matter under discussion. A reader’s letter to the Sun (2004) newspaper, for example, is just as likely to use it as a reference point as a heavyweight commentary in the Independent (2005). In the professional press (Times Educational Supplement, 2005) or a major academic journal (Parton, 2004), it remains a defining moment in the history of the modern British welfare state. We would argue that in the development of the UK’s child protection policy, deciding who is to blame is the key issue. In what follows, drawing on newspaper accounts and a range of other documentary material, we wish to focus in some detail on the struggle that faced newspaper reporters in one particular regard – the positioning of Maria’s mother, Pauline Kepple, along the pivotal victim-villain continuum.

VICTIMS, VILLAINS AND THE SPACE IN-BETWEEN

At the time of her death, Maria had been in her mother’s care for 15 months. That return was the result of a concerted campaign mounted by Mrs Kepple and pursued by her through the courts. Thereafter, a mounting tide of complaints and concerns had focused on Maria’s welfare. On Maria’s death, therefore, the enactment of the morality play through which public understanding of scandalous events is shaped and resolved faced a particular difficulty. At first glance, the identification of good and evil was easily enough accomplished; with Maria’s stepfather (perpetrator) on one side and at least Maria and the Coopers (victims) on the side of the angels.

Maria’s became an almost fabled childhood and her death, even ‘martyrdom’ (Daily Mirror, 1973b), was read by serious commentators (Hendrick, 1994: 253) as pointing … the finger at the range of groups allegedly threatening the ‘British way of life’ – social workers, feminists, Marxists, radical students and teachers, divorcees – and at the equally threatening trends: criminality, pro-abortion, anti-authoritarianism, pop culture, drugs and lack of self-reliance.

Maria’s story was told in terms more familiar to a fairy tale than the pages of a newspaper (Sun, 1973):
The youngster they all loved

Maria was nicknamed Choochie when she went to live with her foster parents, Doris and Robert Cooper.

Mrs Cooper's brother had been Raymond Colwell, Maria’s real father. But he died after an illness.

Soon Maria was growing up happily at the home of the Coopers in Hove, Sussex.

Everyone liked her. And she became the favourite of the sea-front traders at nearby Brighton. …

Maria was the inseparable playfriend of two of the Coopers’ grandchildren.

Together they went on holiday trips to Newquay, Blackpool and Longleat. Family snaps all include Maria. “She was a part of us,” they all said.

THEN came a sudden change … a change that was to alter her life completely.

On 2 October 1971, Maria was taken weeping from the Cooper home.

CHOOCHIE BECAME A CINDERELLA

Maria’s ‘wicked’ stepfather William Kepple – or ‘The Brute’ as he was routinely named in tabloid reporting (see, for example, the Sunday Mirror, 1973) – was easily demonised. He is routinely presented as a hard-drinking, fiery-tempered Irish labourer, living in mainland Britain during the height of the 1970s IRA bombing campaign. The fact that impressions of Mr Kepple by those who described him to the public inquiry into Maria’s death were far more ambivalent found no place in newspaper reporting. The picture of a generally hard-working, rather anxious home-maker, rough but with a ready relationship with his own children, uneducated but very far from inarticulate, which emerges from some of the 70 oral witnesses to the inquiry is entirely absent from newspaper reporting.

All trace of ambiguity in the status of the Coopers is equally expunged from the press account. The complex and fractious nature of the wider Cooper family receives no attention, although it was critical to the decision to return Maria to the care of her mother. The long hesitation of the local Children’s Department before confirming the couple’s registration as foster parents – and then only, and very pointedly, for ‘Maria only’ (CIR, 1974: 316) (a reference that could easily be decoded as meaning they would not have passed the usual standards for approval) – is hardly mentioned. The considerable limitations of the physical accommodation they occupied, two rooms, with sleeping areas divided by curtains from living and cooking area and a bathroom shared with other tenants, was never noted, in sharp contrast to the detailed discussion of Mrs Kepple’s domestic arrangements. Most remarkably, the absence of Mr Cooper during the inquiry proceedings, through serving a custodial sentence in Maidstone prison following conviction for DHSS fraud, was almost entirely eliminated from newspaper accounts. Given that the inquiry took place at the height of the scrounger-phobia
campaigns mounted by Tory newspapers, as unemployment rose above one million during the first half of the 1970 Heath administration, the neglect of the latter point is, perhaps, particularly striking. Only the local Argus (1973: 23 July) referred to Mr Cooper’s absence and then on only one occasion when it was mentioned in a highly sympathetic piece about Mrs Cooper and as further evidence of the burden which she had to bear as the inquiry got underway.

Other characters too were apparently easily placed on one side of the angels or another. Anne Turner, Maria’s primary school teacher who, had she been listened to might have saved Maria, fared better than either Diana Lees, the social worker, or Renee Kirby, the NSPCC Inspector, for example. It would seem that in relation to most of the main characters implicated in Maria’s death, the process described by Peelo (2006: 168), whereby the newspaper audience is being invited ‘to focus on the side of the offended against and is encouraged to feel hurt’, was established without any difficulty.

MRS KEPPLE, AMBIGUITY AND MEDIATED WITNESSES

If the roles of victim and criminal, of hero and villain, were thus so clearly and easily ascribed in the Colwell case, the real point of interest, in testing the ‘mediated witness’ thesis, lies with Mrs Kepple. Who, the reader might ask, is more likely to occupy the position of someone ‘hurt’ by a child’s death than that child’s mother? And would that position not be reinforced still further when the mother concerned had fought for so long, and so hard, to have the child returned to her care? In reality, a much more ambiguous status is occupied by Pauline Kepple. There are a number of ways in which this appears to have implications for the mediated witness of the public press.

Fundamental to any subsequent reported ambiguity is the question of Pauline Kepple’s actual complicity in the suffering and death, if not the manslaughter, of Maria. Were she to be in any way regarded as herself an offender (if only against the ‘moral order’, if not the letter of the law), victimhood would be the more difficult to obtain. In fact, ‘official’ doubts about Mrs Kepple’s own role in the tragedy of Maria’s life and death began almost immediately after the child’s body was wheeled in a pram to the Queen Alexandra Children’s Hospital on the morning of Sunday, 7 January 1974.

OFFENDER?

According to papers held by the Director of Public Prosecutions [DPP] [PRO DPP 2/5197/1], Pauline Kepple was interviewed by the police over the course of some 30 hours in total and made no less than four statements, each one substantially and extensively contradicting the previous version. The final statement, on 12 January, seemed to the police to approach nearest to the truth. It suggested that a series of assaults had taken place from Wednesday 3 January onwards. Despite obvious signs of distress, no decision was taken to have Maria seen by a doctor.
Mr Kepple’s statements to the police were shorter and more consistent. He maintained that Maria suffered from epilepsy and that the majority of her injuries could be explained by a fall downstairs early in the week. He admitted to having struck her once, in anger, on the Saturday evening, but vehemently denied any intention to inflict serious harm on her.

Other than the harrowing details of the autopsy, the only direct evidence available about Maria’s death to the DPP was to be found in the statements of the Kepples. The records show the debate which went on within the Director’s office about the best way to proceed. The officer in charge minuted the Director in this way:

> consideration must be given to Mrs K.’s involvement in the murder and earlier ill-treatment, and whether she should also be charged and, if so, with what offences; alternatively, should she be called as a prosecution witness, despite the difficulty which her ‘several’ statements, ‘all under oath’ would pose for conduct of the case. [PRO: DPP2/5198]

Much debate then followed about the course of action to be taken. The police officer who had been in charge of the interviews with the Kepples provided contrasting accounts of their reactions to events. Mr Kepple, threatened, as he later claimed, with his wife being charged with murder, was recorded as agreeing to make a statement on the basis that:

> I stopped for a couple of minutes; I was thinking of my children and my home. I knew that if my wife was charged my home would be gone to ruins, that I would lose my wife and my family. [PRO: DPP2/5198]

The account made of Mrs Kepple was a good deal more pointed:

> At the time of the interview she was seven months pregnant, her daughter had been murdered by a vicious beating or beatings, and yet she was not upset in any way. Only a couple of times did she cry, and these were merely crocodile tears which she was able to stop immediately. Even when she was caught out in her lies she continued to tell further lies in order to cover up the truth of what had happened … I consider that she is a hard woman, unmoved by the events and I am doubtful as to what story she would tell should she be called to give evidence. [PRO: DPP2/5198]

Despite these strong reservations, the DPP ultimately decided not to pursue any prosecution of Mrs Kepple, provided she was prepared to give evidence in court on the basis of her final statement, the only way, the file records, of making ‘a thin case very much stronger’. Thus the decision not to prosecute Mrs Kepple was justified on three grounds:

[1] ‘there is no evidence to support her being a party to the assault. The gravest charge that can be brought against her is that she delayed taking the child for medical treatment long after the need for such treatment became obvious’ [2] that ‘she seemed to live in dread of her husband, a very violent man’ and [3] ‘the value of her evidence to the prosecution’.
WHAT THE NEIGHBOURS SAID

The role played by Pauline Kepple in the last few months of Maria’s life was probably better known to her neighbours. The Kepples’ immediate next-door neighbours in Maresfield Road, Whitehawk, Brighton, were Mr and Mrs Rutson. Mrs Rutson had been the first person to contact the NSPCC, in April 1972, and her concerns for Maria’s welfare were well documented. She provided evidence at every stage in the events that followed Maria’s death – making statements to the police, together with written and oral evidence to the inquiry. There, she told the panel she had ‘never seen Mr Kepple touch Maria’ (Day Two: 16). His attitude towards the child was one of ‘indifference’. Mrs Kepple, by contrast, was the ‘main cause of harm’ (Day Two: 11). From her first interviews with social workers, Mrs Rutson had described the ‘outrageous frenzies’ (Day Nine: 44) in which Mrs Kepple could be ‘heard always screaming and swearing at the children’ (Day 21: 33). Described in the final inquiry report as ‘a fair and unbiased witness’ and ‘an honest and concerned person with the welfare of Maria very much at heart’ (CIR, 1974: 82), she and other Maresfield Road neighbours were to be leading figures in the local campaign to see a full and independent inquiry established.

Cast in this light, the Rutsons and many other of the Kepples’ neighbours received a strongly positive press that might have served to confound any claims Pauline might have had to victimhood. Their ‘commonsense’ appreciation of the dangers Maria faced, and their many efforts to bring these concerns to the attention of the authorities, was contrasted favourably with the fashionable theories said to have dominated the thinking of social workers and the dilatory way in which warnings were heeded. ‘The people of Maresfield Road’, reported the Sunday Times (1973), ‘are ordinary, respectable people’ who had ‘tried to warn officials’.

Locally, the neighbours appeared amongst those who now ‘launched a Fund in the name of Maria Colwell’ (Argus, 1973).

However, the neighbours were capable of other reactions and other representation. On the day after Maria’s funeral, the flowers around the grave had been destroyed, ‘torn up by rival factions of mourners’. At the funeral, Pauline Kepple had had to run a ‘gauntlet of taunts’ and cries of ‘bloody murderess’ (Argus, 1973). After the trial of William Kepple some months later, Maria’s mother had to move out of her home (albeit for a very brief period):

The word ‘murderer’ has been scrawled on her front wall and as she edged open the door today, a crowd of neighbours shouted: ‘Come out here and we will kill you. Let’s get hold of you’. They stood by a car on which had been stuck a poster that read ‘Bring back hanging – especially for child murderers’. (Argus, 1973)

Thereafter, the unremitting hostility some members of the Brighton public displayed towards her became the subject of regular, and fascinated, newspaper reporting, especially locally. However, in the national newspapers this local hostility was presented in a way that was sympathetic to Pauline. The Daily Express (1973a), for ex-ample, headlined its account of Mrs Kepple’s flight from Maresfield Road as ‘A mother’s
ordeal of hatred’. The *News of the World*, on the following weekend, declared that ‘any woman who has ever had to cope – alone – with a maniacal drunkard will know that there was very little Mrs Kepple could have done’ (*News of the World*, 1973). It was left to the local *Argus* to report, in incredulous tones, that having fled to a ‘secret hideaway’ on 18 April, Mrs Kepple returned to Maresfield Road on 19 April, declaring that, ‘The trouble with the neighbours seems to have died down, so I decided to come back here to try to make a fresh start’ (*Argus*, 1973).

Peelo (2006: 162) reminds us that, ‘The dialogue between readers and newspapers is a curious one: it can be seen as both influencing opinion and as struggling to reflect readers’ viewpoints’ and that local newspapers, in particular, rely for their survival upon an ability to demonstrate that they ‘share social values with their readers’. This distinction helps to explain some of the difference between national papers – more likely to portray Mrs Kepple as unfairly persecuted – and the local newspaper – much more likely to take the part of neighbours.

On the basis of her own complicity, in the way in which distance from Brighton seems to have turned reasonable doubts and local hostility into evidence of unfair persecution, Pauline’s ownership of victimhood remains uncertain. The final confounding and perhaps the most influential doubts about her status were raised by Pauline herself, however.

**PAULINE KEPPLE – AN ADVOCATE ON HER OWN BEHALF**

The position taken by most official bodies with whom Mrs Kepple came into contact after Maria’s death was summed up in police reports referring to her as ‘low class and lacking in intelligence’ (PRO: DPP2/5198). The inquiry report may have put it more delicately, but behind its references to her as physically and emotionally unfit to care for Maria (CIR, 1974: 61; 321) lay much the same set of conclusions.

Reviewing the evidence at a 30-year distance, a rather different picture emerges. Mrs Kepple may have lacked a formal education, but she was a confident and determined advocate in her own cause. In the archives of the *Argus* newspaper, one of the regular letters she wrote to the editor still survives. The handwriting is clear and fluent; the spelling accurate; the message – a plea for Maria to be left in peace – uncompromisingly expressed. It is easier, on reading the correspondence, to see how social workers concluded that her determination to have Maria returned to her some years previously could not, successfully, have been resisted.

She was a skilful and instinctive user of the media. When she wrote letters, she knew she could expect to receive prominent attention, especially when taking issue with criticisms made of her by others. ‘Maria: her mother answers the critics’ declared the *Argus* on 14 May 1973.

She clearly also chose both those newspapers to which she would give interviews and the occasions on which those interviews would be given. From the outset, the *Daily Mail* had taken a particular interest in the story. On 30 November, it published an
extended piece, ‘My Side of the Story – by Maria Colwell’s mother’, billed as ‘her first full-length interview’ since the murder trial. It painted a sympathetic picture, beginning with the paragraph: ‘Maria Colwell’s mother – hounded and jeered by angry women wherever she goes – is fighting a lonely battle’ (Daily Mail, 1973c).

As the inquiry drew towards its conclusion, and her own statement was due to be discussed for the first time, Mrs Kepple agreed to a further interview with the Brighton Evening News, a fact it trailed powerfully in the paper on Monday 19 November, the day before publication – ‘tomorrow: Maria the story still to be told’. The reaction to the statement, when released on 30 November, was strongly sympathetic. National newspapers, of all persuasions, were unanimous:

Guardian (1 December 1973): ‘I was her mum – I loved her’.

Daily Express (1 December 1973): ‘Terrible night my Maria died’.

Daily Mirror (1 December 1973): ‘How I tried to save Maria: Mrs Kepple tells for the first time of beating that killed her daughter’.

Daily Mail (1 December 1973): ‘The night I fought to save Maria – by her mother’.

When her barrister, Miss Crichton, provided the inquiry with a concluding address, a few days later, the reporting reached a high-water mark of support:

Daily Mirror (7 December 1973): ‘The Agony of Maria’s mother – by a woman barrister’. ‘A woman barrister choked back tears yesterday as she described the agonies that piled up for the mother of little Maria Colwell.’

Sun (7 December 1973) ‘The Torment of Maria’s mother – tears as inquiry hears of a poison pen campaign’.

Daily Mail (7 December 1973): ‘Maria’s mother “misunderstood” – ‘Maria Colwell’s mother had a ‘rough and ready’ way of bringing up children, but it did not mean that cruelty was involved’.

The Daily Telegraph (1973), on the same day, reported Miss Crichton as saying that, ‘Mrs Kepple has lost her child, her husband and her home. She has been turned away by shopkeepers. She has lost her job’.

Coverage such as this, particularly at national level, might all but have confirmed Pauline’s ownership of victimhood, except that Pauline herself in her own contributions to the press undermined any claims being made on her behalf. Three elements of this will be illustrated here.

First, and from the outset, Mrs Kepple insisted upon contesting key ingredients in the myth of Maria and William Kepple newspapers were busy concocting. In letters and interviews she contested accusations that Maria had been ill-treated. In a letter published in the Argus on 14 May 1973 she insisted that:

My daughter was never beaten-up or ill-treated by her stepfather or myself before her death.
She was not starved. She was treated the same as my other children. I would not be much of a mother to treat her differently ...

My daughter was happy and well. (Argus, 1973e)

In defending the standard of care offered to Maria, she also insisted that she had been right to have Maria returned to her. On 18 April 1973, for example, the Daily Mail reported the outcome of the murder trial. It included an interview with Mrs Kepple as saying, ‘I have no regrets about having her back. I was getting back on my feet and my new husband got the room ready and decorated it for Maria’ (Daily Mail, 1973b).

The defence of Bill Kepple hinted at in this statement was repeated and elaborated on many occasions. On the same day as the Daily Mail’s post-trial report, Argus readers were told that ‘I will never believe my husband is a murderer. He is too kind and wonderful to the other children’. Moreover, not only was Mr Kepple not to blame, Maria was the author of her own distress. As she told Argus readers, ‘He wanted her back and tried to be a father to her, but she wouldn’t take to it … She resented him and in the end he resented her’ (Argus, 1973).

Not only did Mrs Kepple contest the version of past events newspapers were fast consolidating as the received wisdom of the Colwell case, her ongoing conduct equally refused to settle into a single track through which readers could be invited to share in her tragedy. Nowhere was this more the case than in the conduct of relationships. On the one hand, she provided ample material for a stand-by-your-man narrative, in which readers learned how ‘Mrs Pauline Kepple, 38, vowed: “I love my husband deeply. I shall wait for him to come out of jail” (Argus, 1973) and how ‘I still wear his wedding ring. I never take it off’ (Sun, 1973). On the other, on 28 August 1973, and just days after the first preliminary meeting of the inquiry, Mrs Kepple used the Argus to inform readers that she was pregnant again and expecting her 10th child ‘early next year’. She outlined her plans to marry again – but not to whom, ‘Mrs Kepple refused to name the father’ – and ‘to stay in Brighton’. Indeed, readers of the Argus were privy to the information before Mr Kepple – ‘Mr Kepple does not know I am pregnant’, she told the reporter, ‘I am going to tell him …’ (Argus, ). It was not long before the identity of the new man became known, a divorced Irishman, Valentine O’Loughlin, who thereafter attended the inquiry hearings with Mrs Kepple, becoming embroiled in one of the disturbances that surrounded her appearances there (Day 17).

With this in mind, it was not, perhaps, surprising that the Sun newspaper reported, on 6 December 1973, and just as the public hearings of the inquiry were drawing to a close that, ‘Kepple: I want to divorce’. ‘William Kepple, who savagely killed Maria, wants a divorce’, it informed its readers, ‘But his wife, Pauline, expecting her 10th child, is praying he will change his mind. Mrs Kepple, aged 39, said last night she was shocked and upset about Kepple’s letter saying he is to start divorce proceedings. She said, “I can only hope he won’t go on with it. If only I could talk things over and explain everything. But he has not answered my letters” (Sun, 1973b).

What were readers to make of all this? Domestic victim, loyal wife, sexual harpy – all of these personas jostled for attention, adding to the difficulty of simply situating Pauline Kepple securely in the moral lesson of the Colwell case.
SOCIAL WORK

Finally, in this discussion of Mrs Kepple as an advocate in her own cause, we turn to her relationship with social work and social workers. In the terms adopted here, one of the strongest emerging threads in the creation of this ‘mega’ case was the sense of social work as being a cause of social difficulty, rather than a solution to it. Diana Lees, the local authority social worker responsible for supervision of Maria, and author of the Juvenile Court report that acquiesced in Maria's return to her mother's care, was physically and verbally attacked by members of the public at the inquiry hearings and the subject of much highly hostile press reporting and commentary. The inquiry report largely endorsed this conclusion.

Soothill et al. (2004) suggest that ‘mega’ cases occur at a point where they tap into a wider set of contemporary social concerns. We have argued elsewhere (Butler and Drakeford, 2003, 2005) that major social welfare scandals take place at a point where old hegemonies are giving way to new paradigms of social policy and practice. In the case of the Colwell Report, as discussed at greater length below, it can plausibly be suggested that the high-water mark of the 1945 welfare state had passed with the creation, as the last act of the 1966–1970 Labour government, of the unified, Seebohm social work departments. During the 1970s, however, the tide receded rapidly on the social democratic optimism that social problems were readily enough soluble by state action, locally delivered. Social work was, in this sense, the ‘last-in and first-out’ of the quarter of a century-long Beveridge settlement in so far as it was the last of the ‘universal’ services to be introduced and the first to be systematically rolled back.

Almost alone amongst any protagonists, however, Mrs Kepple insisted on speaking up for social work. From her letters to the Argus – ‘The children’s officer, whom you are trying to condemn, saw Maria regularly’ (Argus, 1973) – through newspaper interviews – ‘In fact Miss Lees was marvellous. She did all she could possibly do. I feel very sad when I hear people blaming her for Maria’s death’ (Daily Mail, 1973) – to her final statement to the inquiry – ‘I would like to say how grateful I am to Miss Lees for everything. I am sure no one could have done more than she did. She was always wonderfully kind and helpful to us’ – she defended the service she had received.

Yet, at the same time, she was embarked, once again, on a battle with the Brighton social services department over child custody. The three children who had been born to her and Bill Kepple had been taken into local authority care in the aftermath of Maria's death. Mrs Kepple argued, consistently, that she had entered voluntarily into that arrangement in view of the general turmoil in her circumstances and the imminent arrival of a fourth child. Once matters had settled down, she sought their return. On Wednesday 9 May 1973 she was reported in the Argus, as arguing that:

Now the baby is nearly five weeks old I am ready for the other children to come home, but yesterday I was told by a children’s officer that I couldn’t have them back. Apparently I can only have them back if a court order is made. (Argus, 1973b)

In a direct echo of earlier disputes, she assured the Argus that, ‘I’ll take it through all the courts if necessary. I am really determined to get my family together again’.
In the event, far from having the three earlier children returned, the Courts ordered the removal of the latest baby, a fate that was also to befall her 11th child, Shaun O’Loughlin, born 23 April 1974.

Thus, in this matter, too, Mrs Kepple sustained her uncertain status as a figure in the overall drama. She was, at once, both social work’s only friend and its greatest antagonist. Newspapers once again struggled to locate her in their pantheon of good and evil. Her repeated attempts to secure the return of her children was, more often that not, reported with some sympathy, as a ‘mother’s fight for baby’s custody’ (Argus, 1974a), repeatedly set back by the authorities: ‘Mrs Pauline Kepple, mother of murdered Maria Colwell, has received another blow to her dream of getting the rest of her family together and moving to another district. She has been told that her three eldest [sic] children must stay in the care of Brighton Corporation’ (Argus, 1973). Yet her attempts to defend the actions of social workers in Maria’s case were reported with a mixture of outrage and incredulity – at best a misplaced loyalty, at worst an attempt to use official incompetence as an alibi for her own misdeeds. For the reader the same confusion results. To witness events through Mrs Kepple’s eyes is to be not either victim or villain but both – and at one and the same time.

A NECESSARY AMBIGUITY?

We have argued elsewhere that each generation gets the welfare scandals it either needs or deserves in the sense that scandals signify important movements in public policy and point to fundamental shifts in the welfare settlement. We have noted also, however, that scandals are not so much events as processes and that their meanings evolve as competing interests lay claim to them. In this sense, scandals are always ‘unfinished’. In the Colwell case, the purchase of those who wished to colonise events as part of a campaign to return the death penalty turned out to be somewhat weak. For those who wished to identify through Colwell the incompetencies of the local state or the dangers to civil society of the neo-profession of social work, it was the first seismic event that caused the tidal wave of childcare scandals that was to wreak so much havoc during the 1980s and beyond. But some issues were far less settled and it is to these that Pauline Kepple’s ambiguous status as victim or villain can be connected.

It could be argued that Pauline Kepple’s status simply as a mother would have been sufficient to complicate the judgement to be made upon her during a period of enormous change in the reconstruction of motherhood during the 1970s. However, Pauline Kepple occupied a very particular interstitial position – her membership of a ‘problem family’.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PROBLEM FAMILY

After any scandal (indeed, it is a defining characteristic), the question that has to be answered first is ‘how did this happen?’. Time after time, newspapers returned to the
story in order to ask the question, ‘How could such sustained brutality pass unchecked in welfare state Britain?’ (Daily Mirror, 1973). ‘How did it happen’, asked a reader’s letter to the Argus, ‘that in 1973, with all our Welfare State, this little one was so badly used?’ (Argus, 1973).

The answer to this question tapped into a debate far older than the welfare state itself. On the one hand, there were explanations which located responsibility outside the immediate family. As each witness appeared before the inquiry, its chairman, Thomas Field-Fisher QC, posed the same question – were the Kepples, in that imprecise term, a ‘problem’ family? And, just as regularly, the answer was provided in the negative. ‘No, not at all’, replied George Smith, the Area Housing Officer (Day 11: 2). ‘I do not think I would have called it a problem family’, decided Miss Lees, under heavy questioning (Day 12: 37). ‘From the impression I had at that time I would not have thought this was a problem family’, concluded the family GP Dr Barley (Day 14: 57). For these witnesses, the difficulties were, in the traditional analysis of the political left, more structural than individual. In the case of the Kepples, the pressures bearing down on them were manifold and relatively easy, in retrospect, to identify as including family feuds, progressive isolation from neighbours, threats of eviction, unemployment, debts, very frequent pregnancy, marital discord, desertion and physical exhaustion.

Such explanations, however, were not attractive to politicians of a different persuasion and, in 1973, the Department of Health and Social Security was in the hands of one of the most ideologically preoccupied of all post-war health ministers, Sir Keith Joseph. For Sir Keith, the conundrum of the post-1945 era was to explain the persistence of poverty and a ‘welfare’ class at a time of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity. His own conclusion was to focus on what he identified as the phenomenon of ‘intergenerational transmission’, in which poverty and disadvantage were thought to run in families, passed down the generations. This sort of analysis was not without its support in popular thinking. A reader’s letter in the Argus on 19 May commenting on the Colwell case was headlined, ‘Sterilisation – that’s the only answer’, and went on to declare the writer’s belief that ‘if the high grade cretins usually involved in this most repulsive type of crime are to be prevented from spreading their poison into the rest of us then their compulsory sterilisation is inevitable. It is in their own interests as much as ours, in fact more so’ (Argus, 1973).

In a surprisingly sympathetic interview with Marjorie Proops, doyenne of the Labour-supporting Daily Mirror (29 November 1973), Sir Keith repeated much of the same argument, albeit in far less offensive and flamboyant terms. In a lengthy article, readers were told of how ‘We talked about Maria Colwell and her shocking fate and he said we’d got to learn lessons from her martyrdom’. In learning those lessons:

He talked to me about the work he has instituted on a subject in which he is passionately involved: the phenomenon of transmitted deprivation.

In layman’s language he calls it the ‘cycle of deprivation’. It means that each generation of deprived families tends to produce yet more deprived families; the problems therefore multiply at an alarming rate with each new generation. And so the breeding of disaster goes on and on and on.
And the solution, as Sir Keith saw it?

_I know I keep getting back to family planning, but I do think it can reduce the problem._ (Daily Mirror, 1973d)

How did this wider debate play into newspaper readers’ sense-making in the Colwell case? Was Mrs Kepple a struggling, but genuine, home-maker who understood that, in her own words, when arguing for the return of her children:

_I know we’ll be hard up having so many. But as long as you can feed them and clothe them – even if they’re not very smart – it doesn’t matter._

_What does count though is the love you give them._ (Brighton Evening News, 1973)

Or was she a person of impossibly low capacity, who – even if her motives were accepted – would never be able to provide an acceptable level of care to her ever-growing brood of children? It was because this question remained unanswered at this point that Pauline Kepple’s status remained unfixed. Whereas Bill Kepple had been judged guilty of Maria’s death, it was not clear who had been responsible for her short and unhappy life. Were the problems of the Kepples uniquely theirs or were they, to some degree, a function of more systemic failures? A problem family or a family with problems? The ambiguity that surrounds Mrs Kepple was thus systemic and ideological, as well as personal and particular.

CONCLUSION

This paper began with Peelo’s (2006) contention that victims, and victimhood, are central to the way in which newspapers, in particular, position themselves and their readers in relation to ‘mega’ crimes. We have argued that welfare policy, like crime policy, is a ‘contested framework (public narrative)’ (Peelo, 2006: 169) and the scandal is the equivalent of the mega crime. Here, too, the press helps us to know when to boo and hiss and when to cheer.

Our argument, however, has been that the ascription of such status to individual actors in these contested areas can be less straightforward than at first appears, and that even the powerful pull archetypes exercise over media presentation can break down in the face of radically differing views and active resistance to the simple reification of heroes and villains. Through a microanalysis of the Colwell case, we see individuals joined to larger themes and issues – of family, responsibility and culpability – as they become _dramatis personae_ in the morality play that is the welfare scandal. In the main, our heroes and villains belong to an established pantheon. But in the struggle to make meaning, those who do not fall easily into either category may provide us with the most clues to what is really at stake.
Note

1 In an account of the intertwining of crime, media and culture in the Colwell story, a footnote needs to be devoted to the voluble secretary of the fund, Robert Beaumont. Ten years earlier, in one of the most sensational trials of the 1960s, he had himself stood trial for the murder of his 21-year-old wife, Christine. Known in those days as Harvey Holford, he had been owner of a string of Brighton nightspots, including the Whiskey-A-Go-Go coffee bar, the Calypso Club and the Blue Gardenia Club where, in the early hours of 15 September 1962, he shot his wife three times with a .38 revolver. He was discovered, dressed only in a white singlet and cradling his wife in his arms, deeply unconscious from an overdose of barbiturates.

During the summer of 1962, Christine Holford had set off on a European tour where she appeared to have adopted an enthusiastic and ecumenical approach to male members of the then Common Market. In August, she arrived at the Cap Ferrat villa of Conservative MP and barrister Richard Reader. There she was introduced to millionaire John Bloom, a washing-machine tycoon whose own affairs were to end in spectacular and scandalous failure. The affair between them became known to Holford when he arrived unexpectedly in Nice, taking his wife home to Brighton with him. In August, he assaulted her seriously when she announced her intention to leave him and set up in a Mayfair flat Bloom had promised to provide. On 1 September, her 21st birthday, she repeated her intention of leaving him, but was persuaded not to. On 14 September, the couple appeared in public together for the final time at the Brighton Jazz Ball. Later that evening a disastrous quarrel took place in which Christine Holford again attempted to leave and declared that the couple’s 16-month-old child had a different father.

Before an all-male jury, in March 1963, and aided by a remarkably sympathetic summing up by the judge, Mr Justice Streatfield – ‘Can you imagine’, he asked the jury, ‘any words more calculated not only to sear and cut deeply into the soul of any man?’ – a verdict of not guilty was returned on the charge of murder, on the grounds of provocation and diminished responsibility. A three-year sentence was imposed for manslaughter, the judge telling Holford that ‘there must be few men indeed who have been subjected to greater provocation than you were’.

On release, in October 1964, Holford returned to Brighton and changed his name to Robert Beaumont. It was in that persona that he headed the Maria Colwell Memorial Fund Committee, firing off letters demanding the return of capital punishment. Most remarkably of all, not a single newspaper in which the fund’s activities were extensively reported ever mentioned his previous life. It was left to his death, in June 2006, for obituaries to recall his double life, as nightclub owner and campaigner (see Daily Mail, 2006, for example, for further details).

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IAN BUTLER is Professor of Social Work at Bath University and the Cabinet’s adviser on education and children’s policy at the Welsh Assembly Government.
Email: I.Butler@bath.ac.uk

MARK DRAKEFORD is Professor of Social Policy at Cardiff University and the Cabinet’s health and social policy adviser at the Welsh Assembly Government.
Email: Drakeford@cardiff.ac.uk