Constructing Crime: Moral and Psychological Urgency in Online News Media Coverage of Judicial Proceedings in the John Worboys Case

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Abstract

Forensic psychology has immense value and interest from criminal justice institutions and citizens alike. Representations of its contributions and controversies matter towards psychology as an academic and professional discipline, especially in promoting and inhibiting prosocial aims. This paper analyses thirty-three online news media articles covering criminal justice proceedings (2009–2018) in the high–profile John Worboys case in the United Kingdom (UK). Using critical discursive psychology, we analyzed how criminal justice system actors were invoked concerning common psychological issues. While some coverage was focused on offender motivations, echoing previous research, we also found numerous moralizing practices issuing blame and managing accountability of institutional bodies and actors involved in the case. Moral injunctions were widely used to protest (in)action with tangible urgency embedded in accusations of political, professional, and psychological bias. This paper underlines multiple future study directions on online news media coverage of criminal justice proceedings. The implications of online news media coverage for societal constructions of offending, justice, and parole board processes are discussed.

Key words: *sexual crime, online news media, discursive, judicial proceedings, parole*

1. Introduction

Criminal law exists to protect citizens and punish wrongdoing, preserve order and affirm trust, support property rights, and uphold moral standards. Forensic psychology is traditionally concerned with mapping mind and behaviour to perform prisoner risk assessments and provide knowledge in court and parole contexts to inform decisions and prevent miscarriages of justice (Crighton & Towl, 2015; Stenning, 2009). While psychology as a discipline is scrutinized for how its findings can inform and influence society (Hantke, 1998; Lilienfeld, 2010; Miller, 2004), the probation process is particularly subject to scientific risk assessment and public confidence checks as its decisions concern

the granting (or withholding) of individual liberty and ensuring public safety (Fitzgerald et al., 2022).

Our paper explores the discursive psychological elements underpinning the construction and negotiation of criminal law in its reproduction in the parole context. When parole boards assess prisoner rehabilitation and possible re-entry into society, they negotiate criminal law standards with prisoner behaviour, victim needs, community risk, public expectations, and institutional actors in high-stakes decisions. We are interested in 'psychologizing' attributions – how specific mental or behavioural phenomena are linked to decisions or actions that were challenged in national online news media coverage of a high–profile case where criminal justice decision-making was highly scrutinized and debated. The current paper views this context to provide resources for relevant interpretation (Verkuyten, 2004) and seeks to understand how such framing occurs in coverage of serious crime in media discourse. While extra-linguistic features can be analyzed (Lennon & Kilby, 2020), this paper focuses explicitly on language use for brevity.

1.1 Discursive Constructions of Crime, Deviance and the Use of Institutional Actors

Recent work on the social construction of crime and deviance is multidisciplinary and rich. A trend in qualitative approaches is their common emphasis on language with power relations (Antonio et al., 2011). Santaulària (2007) argues that serious crime depictions defend the status quo through the initial 'destabilization *of…social order'* (p.66) by the offending actor, followed by the reintroduction of institutional authority through their imprisonment. Social policy work has explored how rhetorical phrases synergize with regulatory practices to criminalize undocumented residents (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021). Sociological social psychology work has explored how immigration is harmonized with social problems like crime and community division (Pattison, 2022). A separate strand of social psychology explores how acceptable civic behaviours are idealized in official, civic, and immigrant accounts (Andreouli, 2019; Andreouli & Dashtipour, 2014; Zisakou et al., 2024).

There is a strong discursive psychology (DP) tradition that explores citizenship alongside deviance and related topics. DP argues that talk and text are sites where people invoke psychological themes as resources in everyday sense-making rather than as reflecting internal mental or affective states (Edwards, 1991). Morality is one such example. Verkuyten (2004) provides an excellent exploration of how moral principles, namely from a consequentialist viewpoint centred around outcomes that cause more harm than good or vice versa, are invoked in a sample of interviews with majority New Zealanders about social issues in the early 1990s (Potter & Wetherell, 1995). Further discussion has taken place on how a person's stake and interest are managed in speech, be it confessed or countered, or even considered not relevant in so much as to protect their version of factuality in the face of subjectivity or prejudice (te Molder, 2015). Verkuyten (2004) found instances where moral traditional exclusive reasoning would be mutually applied to justify specific actions. Critical discursive psychology (CDP) would align with this argument but go one step further in that all accounts are seen as situated by context and are thereby framed by power relationships (Locke & Budds, 2020). For example, CDP studies have explored how race, immigration and group identity have been

constructed in online projections of hate (Goodman & Locke, 2024; Goodman & Rowe, 2014; Goodman et al., 2023).

Particularly relevant to the current study, Bartels and Parsons (2009) used DP to analyze a courtroom transcript of Dennis Rader's confessions of his killing of at least ten people in the United States, investigating how he drew upon popular understandings of serial killing such as perpetrator sympathy, trans–human monstrosity, and sexual fantasy drive. They argue that the narratives of serious crime often adopt essentialist outlooks seeking to discover the 'nature' of perpetrators. Through the perpetrators' use of essentialist narratives, they argue that this has implications for the perpetrator, including mitigating responsibility, justifying specific actions, and obscuring violence. How such realities are posed to us and how we respond, as media consumers, shape us as social psychological beings. Such psychological contexts, in turn, mediate the potentialities of social reproduction and social change when it comes to the ongoing cultural politics of crime and model behaviour in society. The attention that media draws to institutional actors and their decision-making proceedings has recently been conceptualized as being both mutually constitutive of each other and intertwined (Jackson, 2010). In a criminal justice context, this could have led to macro-structural dynamics in parole hearings fuelled by institutional actors' motivations (Guiney, 2023). Institutional actors risk experiencing dissonance with each other if their decisions conflict with the moral and social expectations of the public (Guiney, 2022). This present research aims to investigate online news media coverage of sexual crimes and judicial proceedings of a prominent case from the UK.

1.2 The John Worboys Case

The current study looks at online news media coverage of serious crimes (sexual assaults) committed by John Worboys (we note that Worboys' name changed to Radford during the second court case; however, we refer to Worboys throughout for consistency). Worboys was dubbed the 'black cab rapist' when accounts of his actions became known (e.g., *the Guardian*, October 26, 2010). In 2009, he was convicted of one count of rape, five sexual assaults, one attempted assault, and 12 drugging charges, although it was stated his victims could be well into the hundreds. After serving 10 years, the parole board reviewed Worboys' case alongside Forensic Psychological risk assessment evidence. They determined he was fit for release on a 10-year license, subject to monitoring, weekly probation meetings, and a bar on contacting survivors (Siddique, 2018). The decision was fiercely criticized, with coverage focusing on community risk and victims who were reportedly not informed of the plans for his release. In the ensuing fallout, the parole board Chair ultimately resigned, new victims testified evidence, and Worboys' was resentenced in late–2018. Several institutional actors were blamed, and parole board decisions have continued to face fierce scrutiny since.

1.3 The Current Study

Cases of intense controversy have important implications for forensic psychology practice (Crighton & Towl, 2015; Roberts & Stalans, 2018). The Rader case analyzed by Bartels and Parsons (2009) explores how confessions can negotiate blame and accountability (cf. Abell & Stokoe, 1999). Our case is

interesting in different ways: the withdrawal of the parole board's release order and Worboy's resentencing occurred after new evidence was assessed in court amid pressure from news reports and victim outrage.

Using CDP, our study partially explores how Worboys' criminal actions were constructed in a small sample of UK-based online news media coverage of the case. We then explore in–situ psychological sense-making of the commentary between the parole board, critics, and society. Specifically, we explore how moral actions by the relevant institutional actors were presented. When we say 'moral', we mean situational behaviours invoking standards of propriety; what is 'right' and 'good' (or wrong and bad). Thus, we investigate how 'shoulds' (affirming, chastising, accusing, blaming, and related regulatory discursive practices) feature in this case (in relative terms). We focus on coverage of Worboys' court cases, from the original trials in the late 2000s to the resentencing in late 2018, culminating in recent coverage of Worboys' appeals against his latter sentences. Below, we explore our approach to the data in more detail.

2. Methodology

2.1 Dataset

The current study uses secondary archival data from online news media coverage of judicial proceedings. Using CDP, we sought to analyze depictions of criminal action and moral accountability in mass media depictions of the Worboys case and unpack their ideological implications. As a result, we sought to reflect on best practices for presenting legal processes and decisions.

Specifically, we gathered data in the form of articles from online news sources from periods relating to the original trial, the resentencing, and recent appeals. Using the Google search database, we searched for articles using the terms' Worboys', 'Worboys Crime', 'Worboys Parole' and 'Worboys Trial'. We then separated the articles into two date periods: 2009-2010, when the original trial was reported and 2018-2022, when the appeals and resentencing were reported. We sought to be as inclusive as possible regarding political affiliations and editorial stances in the coverage of the criminal justice proceedings of the Worboys case between 2009 and 2022 by getting at least two online articles from prominent national news sites that were returned from our online searches. Upon reaching 33 articles, we stopped collecting new data as we started to find data saturation (Leese et al., 2021). We categorized the articles chronologically according to the date of publishing. It was anticipated that there would be more data in the latter time when the parole board reviewed Worboys, as that was when most of the controversy about the case management circulated. In addition, 2018 was a more active digital space with the growth of alternative media and social justice activism following the '# MeToo' Movement (compared to 2009).

2.2 Ethical Considerations

The study was institutionally approved on June 21, 2022, under the reference 'ETH2122-3583'. The inclusion of online news media articles was treated as informed consent, as individuals mentioned were 'public figures' as per the

British Psychological Society guidelines as they reasonably 'would expect to be observed by strangers' (Kaye et al., 2021).

2.3 Analytic Approach

The articles were analyzed using the CDP framework (Locke & Budds, 2020). CDP broadly has a long-established interest in exploring how psychological realities and socio-legal norms are constructed and negotiated (Locke & Budds, 2020). In the case of serious crime discourse, this was notably explored by Bartels and Parsons' (2009) original work, which sought to 'examine [how] "expert" and popular accounts of serial killing were drawn upon' (p.268). Following this ethos, our study was interested in how psychological themes were invoked to make sense of socio-legal constructions and the implications this had for how perpetrators of such crimes should be managed by the criminal justice system and constructed by citizens.

We initially coded for specific instances where Worboys' explanations for his sexual crimes were mentioned as an exploration of fact construction and accountability (in data different to Bartels & Parsons, 2009). After finding only a small number of noteworthy extracts from the dataset, we shifted focus to explore how blame and accountability were mentioned, coding for specific discursive strategies and ideological patterns. We did this across the two periods (i.e., those around the 2009 and 2018 court hearings). Our findings report 11 out of the 33 articles in depth. We have separated our findings into four themes and several subsequent sub-themes.

3. Findings

3.1 Constructing Motivations for Sexual Crimes

Initially, in our search through data, we were interested in exploring how Worboys' criminal actions were explained (following Bartels & Parsons, 2009). Despite anticipating more instances, we found only three attempted explanations that presented the crime as a reductive consequence (however indirect) of social learning and maladaptive attachment. These three extracts were the only instances in our data of online news media reporting of Worboys' explanations for his offending behaviour.

Extract 1

> In 2019, the court heard he had confessed to a Psychologist that he plied 90 women with alcohol, drugging a quarter of them, after being inspired by pornography. He admitted fantasizing about his crimes since 1986, motivated by a "hostility towards women". (Guardian, February 24, 2021)

Extract 1 provides an explicitly essentialist account, attributing Worboys' social learning ('inspired by pornography') as the cause for developing a maladaptive heuristic akin to a 'dangerous world' (Polaschek & Ward, 2002). Worboys subsequently 'admits' these ('confessed to a Psychologist') desires for a campaign of violence ('admitted fantasizing about his crimes since 1986'). This directionality of emotion embeds the individualistic assumption of internal processes becoming externalized.

Extract 2

> He said he yearned for love: "I think it is due to my mum dying when I was young. I lost her when I was 13 and all my friends were getting attention and cuddles and stuff like that. I just did not think I was getting attention." (Independent News, March 14, 2009)

In Extract 2, the reported speech from Worboys' childhood invokes ideas of loss and neglect as a justification for his struggles and later criminal behaviour. The verbed phrase 'yearned for love' implies a 'child' categorization with an 'affectionate' predicate (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2002). A three-part list ('attention and cuddles and stuff') is suggestive of the extent of Worboys' presentation of his cognitive, emotional, and general needs that were absent after his mother's death. We also see a minimizer ('just') and cognitive verb ('did not think') producing a cause-and-effect explanation that is presented as a deficit that potentially led to offending behaviours.

Extract 3

> Worboys blamed his attention-craving nature on a devastating period in his Enfield childhood — when his mother died when he was 13. He said he craved female attention because he missed out on cuddles at home after his mother's death. (Enfield Independent, March 17, 2009)

Extract 3 is markedly different in that it does not use reported speech. Instead, Worboys' account is presented in a 'script formulation' (Edwards, 1994). Emotion categories such as 'devastating period' and 'attention-craving' present Worboys' situation as exceptionally painful and beyond what an ordinary experience in childhood might look like. Cause and effect are explicitly linked between Worboys' early emotional needs and his later adult wants ('...craved female attention because he missed out'). The removal of Worboys' reported speech lessens his agency and constructs a more streamlined narrative lacking empirical evidence of child development and pathology. Such explanations were surprisingly rare in the data. Instead, most online coverage was devoted to institutional actors and criminal justice processes. In the data to follow, we explore how such accountability is consequential for framing sexual crime.

3.2 Moralizing in Accountability Talk

Throughout the data, we found examples of moralizing in accountability talk. Institutional actors were invoked in moral discourse regarding decisions and inaction. Below are some examples of data that draw on moralizing discourse to place accountability on specific actors involved in the case.

3.2.1 Emotion categories and vagueness presenting 'the' public response

One of the primary arguments within the online news coverage was that criminal justice institutions should justify alleged (in)action. Accusers were often categorized broadly (e.g., 'campaigners', 'women's groups', 'public'). The accused and blamed were often named and shamed in relation to their

professional role and (in)action. There were different ways this could occur. One way involved emotion categories to display disapproval of proceedings.

Extract 4

A 2018 decision to release Worboys was reversed by the Parole Board after a widespread public outcry and prompted other victims to report attacks. (Guardian, February 24, 2021)

Extract 4 contains a vague assessment, with parole board proceedings, responded to by a group of people without demonstrable membership criteria ('widespread public'). They are attributed with an emotion category that indicates an externalizing moral reaction ('outcry'). This action is described as so convincing that the parole board changes its decision ('...was reversed...after'). The emotion category is, therefore, a driving factor in the argument against proceedings.

Extract 5

After public fury at the decision, the high court ordered the board to carry out a "fresh determination" into the case and for Worboys to remain in prison in the interim. (Guardian, November 19, 2018)

Extract 5 shows examples of emotion categories used to construct a singular public response to criminal justice decisions. The term 'public fury' provides a singular emotional response, again from an all-encompassing audience. The emotional responses are even presented here as impactful enough to influence judicial proceedings ('After public fury at the decision, the high court ordered the board to carry out a 'fresh determination').

In these extracts, vague categories and their associated entitlements suppose a singular body politic having its moral integrity violated.

3.2.2 Institutional accountability for, and vulnerability to, Worboys

This finding involved blame for institutional (in)actions or weakness(es) to Worboys being depicted as directly responsible for the fateful parole board verdict. Blame was consistent across both.

Extract 6

Thanks to a catalogue of police failures, he was able to get away with it for years. It's an appalling example of poor policing. But you would have thought, wouldn't you, that 12 years after Worboys was finally convicted, the force might have got their house in order? Sadly, I think that, if anything, things have got worse. (UnHerd, October 6, 2021)

Extract 6 begins with a script formulation to present the police behaviour during the Worboys case as routinely inadequate ('thanks to a catalogue of police failures, he was able to get away with it for years'). The modal verb 'would' and adverb 'finally' highlight the iterative nature of an unmet policing standard in the case. The use of stake confession ('But you would have thought, wouldn't you') encourages a common interpretation that the police remain unable to

protect the public from similar occurrences and infers sole blame onto them ('sadly… if anything, things have got worse').

Extract 7

> The Parole Board failed to take into account the full extent of John Worboys' offending and therefore miscalculated the danger he still poses, the high court has been told.
> Phillippa Kaufmann QC, opening arguments on behalf of two of Worboys' victims opposing his release, said Psychologists had been misled into believing they understood the factors that triggered his campaign of violence against women. (Guardian, March 13, 2018)

Extract 7 states that the parole board 'failed' by understating Worboys' offending. It is constructive in tone (compared to Extract 6). More institutional actors and psychologists are presented. Psychologists, considered experts in human behaviour, are presented as having been 'misled' on Worboys' motivations. This statement shows these actors as vulnerable to Worboys, who is presented as capable of misleading such experts on 'the factors' relevant to his offending. The proceeding adjective ('triggered'), a classic cognitive metaphor of mind-as-machine, and his anti-women war-like strategy ('his campaign of violence against women') suggest mechanisms that 'activated' Worboys' criminal intent and that the psychologists, despite their certainty, had been manipulated into believing they had found the mechanism. Accountability is placed on the psychologists; their knowledge and skills are below Worboy's ability to mislead them.

Whilst both extracts here focus on different bodies, blame is apportioned in similar ways, with the implication that incompetence leads to societal risk and injustice, for example, when a (dangerous) prisoner is (inappropriately) released. This narrative overall discourages re-entry efforts by affirming a highly punitive and reactionary culture of practice (Klein, 2017).

3.3 Psychologizing of Relevant Actors through Extra-Judicial Attributions

There were two thematic blame targets in the data. One was the perpetrator, Worboys, but the latter, a more frequent target, focused on institutional actors responsible for releasing him from custody (the police) and later misunderstanding him and falling for his justifications of a reformed character (the CPS, the parole board, and forensic psychologists).

Psychological characteristics were used to present criminal justice proceedings as inadequate owing to the flaws of individual actors' personalities or behaviours. Sources presented political affiliation alongside the reporting of their role in the Worboys case. In some cases, they were explicitly linked, such as one forensic psychologist's attitudes undermining their subsequent behaviours (Dr Craissati). Below are examples of the psychologizing of relevant actors' extra-judicial attributions in online news media coverage of the proceedings around the Worboys case.

Extract 8

> What part DID the eminent woman Psychologist who says sex attackers 'aren't all monsters' play in the release of black cab rapist John Worboys? Does she not believe that he is a 'monstrous individual'? Dr Craissati is certain to face such a question from the audience at Goldsmiths — because this week she was named as the author of a report that contributed to his imminent release. (Mail Online, January 19, 2018)

Extract 8 has an individual singled out rather than an institutional entity. It begins with a rhetorical question that removes the actors' name and instead highlights their reputation and gender ('eminent woman Psychologist'). The term 'eminent' is suggestive of a category entitlement for fame and respect; 'woman' could be implicative when we consider the gendered dimensions of the crime in question (and the associated entitlements of Worboys covered in extracts 1 and 2). A cognitive verb ('believe') is used to position Craissati as potentially opposed to Worboys' characterization as 'monstrous' (cf. Bartels & Parsons, 2009). It is notable that reported speech of Craissati is specifically 'aren't all monsters,' as without further context, the statement is implied to be casually negligent (as 'sex attackers,' by categorical inference, offensively prey upon others). This Extract links 'monstrous individual' with the psychological identity of the 'sex attacker' Worboys, psychologizing Craissati by challenging her expertise ('…certain to face such a question').

Extract 9

> Sir Keir Starmer dodged questions this morning over the decision not to prosecute John Worboys for dozens more sex attacks. The Labour frontbencher was accused of ignoring scores of women who came forward after the taxi driver's conviction in March 2009. Challenged over the issue outside his home this morning, he said: 'I think those decisions were made nine years ago.' (Mail Online, January 5, 2018)

Extract 9 shows an actor's political affiliation through category entitlement to mark decisions made in the first Worboys case. Pronoun and footing shifts help to assign responsibility and ownership to Starmer ('his', 'he', 'I'). Assessments are followed by second assessments (Willig & Rogers, 2017) to support them, allowing for a doubling down of accusation. Whilst one blames Sir Keir for his attempts to avoid questions about his role ('dodged questions this morning'), the other is for his decision-making ('not to prosecute John Worboys for dozens more sex attacks'). The categorization of Starmer as 'The Labour frontbencher…' links his political affiliations and potential intergroup bias before shifting to more blame ('accused of ignoring scores of women'). This shift positions Starmer's political affiliation as being on the side of people who engage in 'sex attacks' and delegitimizes any possible response to the accusations made (cf. Tileagă, 2007).

3.4 Undermining Empathic Rehabilitation Discourse through 'Elite' Voices and Lay Narratives

A further insight from the data we gleaned was the use of 'elite' versus 'lay' voices (Kilby & Horowitz, 2013). Here, elite institutional voices construct the

state of events 'as they are' to aid fact construction; conversely, lay voices are used to demand accountability from criminal justice institutions. Despite their different applications, these voices both support the inference that rehabilitation in the Worboys case is either unknowable or potentially impossible. Below are some examples of undermining empathic rehabilitation discourse through elite voices and lay narratives in online news media coverage of the Worboys case and subsequent trials.

Extract 10

> Sentencing him, Mrs Justice McGowan said: 'I am satisfied to the required standard, on the evidence I have heard, that you are a continuing risk. I find you are currently dangerous. Your offending spans five years more than previously known. I do not know when, if ever, you will cease to be a risk. It will be for the Parole Board to decide in the future.' (Sky News, February 24, 2021)

In Extract 10 elite voices are invoked in reported speech. A Judge categorization and associated verdict predication is provided ('Sentencing him, Mrs Justice McGowan said…'). Here, the defendant is expected to listen to the Judge's remarks, presented as an overarching narrative. The use of pronouns is interesting; 'I' is used four times, further emphasizing the individual status as one of authority. The elite emphasis is conveyed in the reported speech that refers to Worboys as 'a continuing risk', thus implicitly situating Worboys against those exposed to this risk. The cognitive assertion, 'I find you are currently dangerous', deduces that should Worboys leave the courtroom and walk free, he would present a threat. This elite narrative also combines an admission that the Judge, despite this insight, does not assert or predict any possibility of rehabilitation ('I do not know when, if ever, you will cease to be a risk'. Those circumstances allow the Judge to pass the responsibility for Worboy's future release back to the parole board, a body previously admonished for their decision(s). The management shifts future decisional ownership back to the parole board. This suggests that despite the Judge and the parole board being considered institutional elites, the parole board is not credited with the same elite discursive power as the Judge, suggesting a hierarchy of elite discursive power in criminal justice proceedings (Kilby & Horowitz, 2013).

Extract 11

> There is widespread anger today over the decision to release rapist John Worboys, a London black cab driver jailed for life in 2009 for drugging and sexually assaulting multiple female passengers. Victims and others are demanding to know why Worboys wasn't charged with additional crimes after dozens of women came forward following his conviction, which could have led to a longer prison term, The Times reports. There is also an outcry over the "lack of transparency" in the Parole Board's decision to offer what is viewed as 'early release' to a serial offender. Hardwick promised a public consultation. (The Week, January 5, 2018)

Here, a lay voice is being invoked. It is reported as the consequential viewpoint on the topic of Worboys' 'early release'. The use of the fuzzy categorization 'Victims and others' alongside their categorical entitlements to

feel ('outcry', 'widespread anger') and act ('demanding') summarise the lay voice as one needing to assign accountability for institutional decisions. The lay voice's extant power is also evidenced, wherein they are afforded extra-judicial input ('Hardwick promised a public consultation'). This also suggests a hierarchy of entitlement of most to least, from public to institutional or political bodies, to Worboys himself (as a 'rapist'). The term 'rapist', used as an assessment of Worboys, espouses associations that violate purity and sanctity and thus categorize Worboys with disgust (Hatemi & McDermott, 2012). Thus, reported 'widespread anger' can be seen as a justifiable moral judgement of Worboys' access to an 'early release'. The lay voice presents the victims as credible and justified in their demands, with the media ('The Times reports') as a responsible institution fostering 'good' public opinion and causes. The vague quantification emphasis on 'serial offender' adds credibility to claims that Worboys' release is not justified. Thus, the lay narrative here is giving moral emphasis to 'public' actors that are vaguely positioned as attempting to hold criminal justice institutions accountable ('outcry over the "lack of transparency"').

Together, these extracts provide an insight into two critical voices projected in our dataset. Whilst they use different discursive organizations, both undermine any suggestion of potential rehabilitation for Worboys. While the projected aim of the parole board is to assess 'significant risk', this necessitates intervention engagement (Gov.uk, n.d.). This also presents a dissonance between the government and the parole board that could damage public trust in prison release policies (Fitzgerald et al., 2022; Guiney, 2022). Government responses to parole board shortcomings project a 'law and order' position vis-a-vis instead of nurturing reintegration in context to the offending person's ability and willingness to rehabilitate (Annison & Guiney, 2022). The public and media discussion around Worboys committing sex offences echoes findings from Socia et al., (2021) that male perpetrators of sex offences received the most punitive responses from respondents.

4. Discussion

Criminal justice proceedings coverage presented criminal action and institutional decisions as matters needing accountability work, vagueness and emotion categories, extra-judicial attributions (psychological and political biases), and use of elite and lay voicing, which collectively construct an argumentative space focused upon institutional actors (in)action instead of explanations for the perpetrator, rehabilitation strategies, or public safety. Societal institutions were made responsible for reported public responses, and our findings support previous research on how sexual crimes are narrated differently (Harper et al., 2017). Elite voices are combatively politicized, with extra-judicial attributions of bias justifying that the coverage is warranted. This morality-in-action was seemingly exhibited in most of our surveyed articles. The urgency in discourse concerning the parole board decision addressed a faceless public in need of an administrative honour-based justice (e.g., through resignations). Institutional myths (Zatkin et al., 2022) also appeared in our data, followed by a cyclical dialogue between 'public' fear and resultant extra-judicial outcomes.

Online news media coverage of Worboys' actions focused primarily on moralizing criminal behaviour and the responses to the parole board of his potential release. Two articles (Extracts 2 & 3) provided Worboys' own explanation of blame and accountability for his actions, where the untimely death of his mother is narrated. This evokes a reality of loss, emotional dysregulation, and cognitive neglect. Worboys' explicit linkage of sexual need and maternal loss provides a cause-and-effect explanation, but the online news media did not particularly focus on this in their judicial and parole board coverage. Speculation was instead focused on who was responsible for ensuring defensible criminal justice outcomes. Zatkin et al., (2022) argue that prominent institutional myths dominate sexual offending media discourse with coverage perpetuating tropes such as 'stranger danger' and irredeemability of 'criminal' personality. Our analysis provides evidence for Klein's (2017) argument that news coverage of sexual crimes reinforces public fear of sex offending and implicates highly punitive outcomes. This is contrary to empirical research demonstrating that reoffending rates by crime type are the *lowest* for sexual crimes (Ministry of Justice, 2022). Our analysis suggests institutional myths remain prominent, and when coupled with public consumption of such tropes, criminal justice proceedings may be exposed to extra-judicial interventions resulting from alleged 'public' fear.

Media reports on the Worboys court proceedings and criminal justice outcomes contained many examples of 'morality-in-action' (te Molder, 2015, p.4). The different contexts from which morality was invoked provided examples of live morality that reflexively constituted norms and order actions to make them appear rational. This rationality provided layers of accountability for expected institutional actions and standards. When unmet or deviated from the ordered reality considered 'rational', accountability is invoked with stakes exposed, such as campaigners or politicians involved with the case, victims, 'the public', and criminal justice institutions. News articles often framed the ascribed 'public' view as containing moral urgency for protection from offenders like Worboys, for confidence in institutions to fulfil their prescribed roles, and for individuals to freely engage in socioeconomic practices (e.g., riding a taxi). The public was never specified; in the data, they were essentially the 'hivemind' of a mind-world relationship (Edwards, 2007).

Two kinds of storytelling are evident across the online news coverage. One is heavily saturated in 'fact construction' (Wooffitt, 2005), as witnessed in themes 1 and 2, with events described in vivid specificity to link cause to effect; the other involves a more literary tone with a dark and menacing narrative filled with antagonists, victims, and occasionally, a hero figure (Hantke, 1998) as seen in themes 2, 3 & 4. In both styles, see-saw (un)ethical decision-making is invoked in the coverage: what *should* certain actors with responsibilities do; how do they justify behaviour.

We can see parole board practice remaining controversial (or at least problematic) with the very recent decision announced by the Justice Department in July 2022, with parole board processes now becoming open events (Guardian, 2022). The recent changes are argued to give parole board chairs more difficult judgements to make, which may add more problems to the current issues facing parole board hearings, alongside growing critique surrounding a newly introduced emphasis for a sitting Secretary of State to make a 'single view' decision over the expertise of a parole board panel (Hewson, 2022). Political debate and subsequent penal policy that is 'complex

and contradictory' (Guiney, 2022) make for a messy reporting climate. Sentencing remarks are also now delivered live online (Gov.uk, 2022). Such developments were described by those responsible for changes as a move to 'improve transparency and reinforce confidence in the justice system' by news companies (Guardian, 2022). It remains to be seen whether the intended effect of sentencing remarks being viewed by the public is achieved, especially with the subsequent change of government in 2024.

4.1 Potential Limitations and Future Directions

We see several potential avenues for future research. One that a future study could look at is the impact of news/media criminal justice reporting on public attitudes toward criminal justice proceedings and institutions. For example, analyzing how a focus group makes sense of a high-profile case would allow us to understand how citizens use morality-in-action as unheard voices in this discursive nexus. One potential study limitation was using secondary data reporting on the case. Future research could collect primary data by capturing live speech from relevant parties to understand how this might translate into more naturalistic talk (rather than published coverage). A second limitation is our focus on purely UK-based material. While this had a clear rationale regarding the context of the Worboys case, it would be interesting to see how such coverage might vary across different cultural contexts. Some research has broached cross-cultural phenomena, including race (Goodman & Locke, 2024; Goodman & Rowe, 2014; Goodman et al., 2023), immigration and online hate projections. As an interdisciplinary question, future research could look deeper into how scrutinous media reporting affects decision-making by criminal justice bodies, as the implications of this process go far beyond the discursive psychological aspects we have covered. The implications of the Worboys case echo to the present day, with the same moral urgency in recent changes in Parole board evidence-gathering practices (Hewson, 2022) and the live broadcasting of judicial sentencing remarks for public consumption (Guardian, 2022). There are individualistic, inquisitorial, and potentially authoritarian ideological trends underpinning such developments, some of which can be seen in the case considered here. There are discrepancies between online news media coverage of sexual crimes and available evidence concerning such crimes. Thus, misunderstanding and misinformation (Klein, 2017) might combine to reinforce punitive action and open the opportunity for manifestations of the risks that come with the pursuit of 'feel-good' measures as opposed to the protective factors of evidence-based rehabilitative approaches (Monterosso, 2009).

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Links to Extracts

Extract 1: https://news.sky.com/story/black-cab-rapist-john-worboys-to-appeal-life-sentences-for-drugging-women-12227442

Extract 2: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/black-cab-rapist-struck-again-and-again-after-police-mistakes-1644889.html

Extract 3: https://www.enfieldindependent.co.uk/news/4208303.black-cab-rapist-was-from-enfield/

Extract 4: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/feb/24/john-worboys-rapist-loses-appeal-against-life-sentence

Extract 5: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/nov/19/john-worboys-must-stay-in-prison-says-parole-board

Extract 6: https://unherd.com/2021/03/why-women-fear-the-police

Extract 7: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/13/john-worboys-parole-board-court

Extract 8: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5290509/Was-woman-Psychologist-Worboyss-release.html

Extract 9: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5237363/Questions-Labour-John-Worboys-early-release.html

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