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“The best three days of my life”: Pleasure, power and alienation in the 2011 riots

Tim Newburn, Rachel Deacon, Beka Diski, Kerris Cooper, Maggie Grant and Alex Burch

Abstract

This article considers one of the less frequently elements of riots: the emotions to which they give rise. Based on testimony from interviews with people who took part in the 2011 England riots, it explores the curiosity which drew many onto the streets, the excitement and the fear involved in such quickly unfolding and unpredictable events, the impunity that many felt being part of such large crowds together with the sense of ‘empowerment’ many experienced as a consequence of their involvement. The article suggests that a number of concepts regularly deployed within cultural criminology – most obviously ‘carnival’ and ‘edgework’ - are useful in understanding elements of the emotional world of the riot. More fundamentally, however, it is argued that what the accounts describe more than anything else is a pervading sense of ‘alienation’ among many of those involved in the disorder.

Key words: Riots, disorder, emotions, edgework, carnival, alienation

Emotions and urban disorder

In this article we draw on in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants in the 2011 England riots to explore in their own words the experience of involvement in serious public disorder and, more particularly, to consider some of the emotions experienced during, or highlighted as a consequence of, participation in the riots. Alongside graphic descriptions of what occurred during the riots interviewees were also keen to describe in vivid detail how it made them feel to be part of it. Predictably, what emerges from the rioters’ narratives is not a single experience but a multiplicity of views. From feelings of curiosity and feelings of unprecedented empowerment, to those who were in fear and those who became disillusioned, the riot ‘experience’ belies easy categorisation.

Before turning to the rioters’ accounts we need briefly to consider why the emotional experience of the rioting is of concern. Why should we be interested in how those who were engaged in serious disorderly activity felt about their actions and those of others? In his work on the significant urban disorder of the early 1980s, Michael Keith sought to offer a rounded analysis of what had taken place in London and beyond. Having reviewed many extant accounts of the riots, Keith (1993: 94) argued that they were incomplete in many ways and, centrally, any comprehensive understanding ought to include:

... a conception of *rioting* which captures the impromptu nature of events without reducing the actions of individuals to the behaviourist response to an array of environmental stimuli. Such a description demands a notion of *spontaneity* that does not devalue the rationality of individuals yet at the same time conveys a notion of the social context in which such actions are situated.

Keith's observation arises out of what is arguably one of the most significant difficulties that has bedevilled academic accounts of rioting – the tendency of some on the one hand to exaggerate the 'irrationality' in the behaviour of crowds (classically, Le Bon, 1952) and, on the other, the converse propensity of some commentators toward a form of socio-economic determinism in which the actions of rioters are presented as a straightforward expression of their grievances (for a comprehensive critique of such approaches see Waddington, 1994). Neither approach captures the complexity of social conduct for, as Norbert Elias (1982: 230-1) observed, the social dynamic 'is neither "rational" – if by "rational" we mean that it has resulted intentionally from the purposive deliberation of individual people; nor "irrational" – if by "irrational" we mean that it has arisen in an incomprehensible way.' Consequently, Elias argues, approaches that consider 'only the consciousness of men [sic], their "reason" or "ideas", while disregarding the structure of drives, the direction and form of human affects and passions, can be from the outset of only limited value' (Elias, 1982: 284). If we accept this, then the inevitable conclusion is that riots, and the conduct of rioters, both need to be understood as a set of constructed social acts containing many potential levels of meaning, including the affectual. In this context, Jack Katz's (2002: 260) observations, made in a very different context, apply perfectly well to rioting:

Any social act, from making love to making war, must be constructed if it is to exist. Seen from the outside both sex and violence may appear to be a lot of wild thrashing about, but from the inside they have coherent interactional meanings and are recognizable as a distinctive type of activity because they develop along non-random lines.

Katz's own work, particularly as it relates to the affective character of violent crime, has been at the forefront of criminology's recent engagement with emotions (Katz, 1988). In contrast to the rational choice-influenced theories attracting ever-greater attention within contemporary criminology, Katz's work seeks to refocus attention on the experiential nature of crime – what he has referred to as crime's 'sensual dynamics'. Intriguingly, given the very powerful emotions that would appear to be involved in rioting, academic studies have tended to pay relatively little attention to this aspect of disorder. Indeed, within the general field of crime and criminology the study of emotions remains somewhat undeveloped, though this is beginning to change (see, for example, Karstedt et al, 2011).

Method

The data utilised here were drawn interviews with 270 people from London, Birmingham, Manchester, Salford, Liverpool and Nottingham who admitted having taken part in the riots and, in the vast majority of cases, having not been arrested. The work was undertaken largely in October 2011, about six to ten weeks after the riots. A large group of interviewers was recruited and trained by the LSE and the Guardian newspaper. Then personal contacts, and newspaper 'fixers', were used to begin a process of snowball sampling in the main communities affected by the riots. The aim was to interview as broad a range of people involved in the riots as possible, but to do so quickly in order to try to maximize the chance that the study would be part of public and political debates. In all 185 people were interviewed in London and a further 85 in Birmingham, Nottingham, Manchester, Salford and Liverpool. Of these, 79% were male, 31% were aged 17 or under and a further 34% were aged 18-20. In terms of ethnicity, 49% self-identified as Black, 27% as White, 19% as mixed race and five per cent as Asian. Given the subject of the interviews and their timing, strict anonymity was guaranteed

The vast majority of the 270 respondents talked explicitly about their participation in a variety of riot 'actions' including the violence, arson, protest, and the looting. In semi-structured, open-ended qualitative research interviews, lasting usually between 40 and 90 minutes, respondents were asked about their

involvement in the disorder, including what actions they had taken, how long their participation had extended, their perceptions and motivations, together with a small number of closed questions at the end about themselves and their experiences and attitudes. Given the difficulties associated with 'post-hoc rationalisation' great care was taken to ensure that the interviews were conducted in a non-leading manner. Given the complexity of the data it was felt that the best way to uncover the perspectives of the rioters was to adopt an 'exploratory' or 'content-driven' approach, using thematic analysis as the basis for the inductive identification of key themes and sub-themes (Guest et al, 2011; and in the context of riots research: Stott and Drury, 2000). The focus was therefore not on the application of pre-defined codes and categories, such as in content analysis, but rather on ensuring that any findings were located in the textual data itself. Great care was taken to ensure the analysis was rigorous with any potential bias reduced, and particular attention was paid to developing strategies for monitoring and improving inter-coder analysis and, consequently, reliability. All interviews were fully transcribed and checked, and then read and re-read initially by a single analyst. Key themes were generated inductively from the transcripts, with an analytical team of five working separately but interdependently.

The quest for excitement

The English riots of 2011 broke out on Saturday 6th August, two days after the fatal shooting, by the police, of Mark Duggan in north London. On the Saturday, a peaceful protest outside Tottenham police station in north London gradually gave way to violence and later to rioting. Many of those involved in the very earliest outbreak of disorder in Tottenham, had either been involved in, or were at the fringes of, the protest near the police station. Thereafter the process by which people heard about and became involved in the rioting was extraordinarily varied. Many spoke about their surprise at their involvement having initially only attended out of curiosity to see what was going on. A 21 year old female from Clapham described how, initially interested after watching the television coverage, she found herself at the site of the disturbances 'I was just curious, Because you see it on telly. In Tottenham and other places... So I was just there. Basically to see for myself what was going on... Curious really.' However, once there many found themselves caught up in what was happening 'I actually just went down there to just to spectate, I really did at first I think most of the spectators did exactly the same, they just actually came along just to watch they just found themselves wound up in it' (46 year old male, Salford). To this extent they were describing something that, in the end, they found irresistible.

In a similar manner, others reported seeing some of the disorder – the 'action' - on television and feared that they were potentially missing out on something important: 'there's just so many people doing it. You just think you're missing out as opposed to anything else' (21 year old male, Peckham). What they were missing out on some found difficult to describe, but in reading their accounts it is hard to avoid the impression that it was primarily excitement – 'the buzz'. As one 17-year old female from Manchester put it, 'I just like the whole fast pace of it, I just wanted to see like what it was like cos I didn't wanna like, when people was talking about it, I'd be like 'oh, I didn't even go''. They were not disappointed it appears for, once there, many vividly described how a 'massive adrenaline rush' took hold which meant that 'once you'd started you just couldn't be bothered stopping' (18-year old white male, Manchester). For one 19-year old man in London 'it was a buzz, it was like a drug that you couldn't say no to', whilst a 16-year old in Birmingham this feeling was kept him involved: 'it gets you excited and pumped up and that, I don't know , even if you're doing a bad situation....it just makes you want to do it again'.

The accounts of the rioting given by many of the respondents in the study are suffused, at least initially, with a sense of excitement, exhilaration and pleasure at what is happening and what is possible. Indeed, several used one of cultural criminology's favourite terms – carnival – to describe what was happening and

what they experienced. One 50-year old female described the rioting in north London as like being at 'Tottenham Carnival...seeing people that you hadn't seen for ages...during the year, it was like, "Oh, hi" [laughing] Honestly it was....it was really like that. It was quite enjoyable. It was really enjoyable actually'. Here, a 21-year old man from Manchester describes his experience:

Everyone obviously had had a few drinks. You know, smoking spliffs. Everyone was happy, like throwing stones at the police n'that. Ha ha, yes it was a party atmosphere like, it was a carnival atmosphere

What many describe is a sense of only being partially in control, of being somewhat swept away by what was happening around them. Whilst it is perfectly possible that such accounts involve a degree of post hoc rationalisation, rarely did it appear to be the case that in constructing their accounts respondents were seeking to excuse themselves, or explain away their actions. The following 18-year old Londoner illustrates this point:

I got caught up in the moment really... It was crazy. It was one of the best moments of my life but one of the worst at the same time, like I'm ashamed of it, but, boy (laughs), it was a real buzz like, just to see, like, you felt like, you felt like you could probably murder someone and get away with it, like it was crazy.

For many this sense of excitement was, as the respondent above describes, the temporary sense of freedom, an ability to do and experience things that would otherwise be unavailable. In lives that were otherwise rather unexciting this was an opportunity, however risky, that was hard to resist:

I was in disbelief really. I was just in awe. There's no way to describe the feeling like, it's like a feeling of excitement, adrenaline, mixed with like a slight hint of fear... Because there was no authorities, nothing. There was basically no rules. People could have done whatever they wanted really. [19-year old, black British male, London]

It would be wrong, however, to reduce the strength of the emotions described simply to the straightforward absence of controls and the excitement of temporary release and freedom. As the following respondent, an 18-year old man from London, describes, a sense of power and strength was also derived from the experience:

It felt free...It felt like someone had just, something like someone was holding onto your shoulders in like a hug for a long time and then they just let go, like, no drugs could make you feel like this kinda happened, like it was that, it was that serious man! You sure, you felt invincible in a way. You felt like, ah I can't even describe it...It was a good feeling, it was like excitement and fear mixed together.

In part such feelings derived from being part of a very large group. The numbers provided a degree of security, enabling them to engage in actions that they wouldn't likely countenance otherwise, and also giving a sense of togetherness, of solidarity, almost of community spirit. As one rioter put it: 'in the sickest way possible it felt good because everyone for once was actually stuck together. You know it was the one time when everyone was helping each other out, and it had to be robbing Footlocker!' [17-year old male, London]. This solidarity was significant enough for extant differences – even among gangs (xxxx et al, 2011) – to be temporarily put aside. As one 18 year old in Brixton noted, 'people that you wouldn't see on the

same road without altercation on a normal day were walking together, talking side by side, everyone was talking... like no one was a stranger, it was just the community, people, as one...'.¹

Excitement was a powerful, almost overriding initial emotion during the riots. A palpable sense of possibility, enjoyment and pleasure was reported by a huge number of respondents in *Reading the Riots*. In this regard, Presdee's (2000: 7) discussion of the 'carnival of crime, and his observations on joyriding, street crime, antisocial behaviour and other activities have a degree of pertinence:

Excitement, even ecstasy (the abandonment of reason and rationale), is the goal of the performance of many of the dramas related here. The quest for excitement is directly related to the breaking of boundaries, of confronting parameters and playing at the margins of social life in the challenging of controllers and their control mechanisms.

Presdee's observation about the 'quest for excitement', it seems to us, applies equally to collective disorder as it does to the other forms of transgression he analyses in his book. Indeed, writing in the *New York Times* about the US riots in the late 1960s James Q. Wilson made a similar observation. He argued that 'they were *expressive* acts – that is actions which are either intrinsically satisfying ('play') or satisfying because they give expression to a state of mind' (quoted in Quarantelli and Dynes (1970: 171). However, there is one slight caveat that should be entered about the idea of a 'quest for excitement'. In understanding involvement in riot, the terms 'quest' and 'drama' arguably give too strong a sense of planning and rationality.

Ferrell (2010: 313) describes cultural criminology's interest in crime as *carnival*, arguing that a range of activities including 'drug-taking, gang rituals, arson, and "hotting" or "joyriding" in stolen cars can be understood as free-floating, historical residues of carnivalesque excesses that were once contained inside ritualized times and events'. The implication is that in the absence of such ritualised routines, other alternative forms are required. In this regard one might helpfully borrow, lightly, from Norbert Elias' application of his own theory of the civilizing process to the arenas of sport and leisure. Simply put, Elias argues that in an increasingly routinized world, characterised by a relative absence of risk, other routes are explored as a means of experiencing excitement. In particular, sport and leisure are forms of 'mimetic activity' offering 'a social enclave where excitement can be enjoyed without its socially and personally dangerous implications' (Elias and Dunning, 1986:90). Presdee (2000), though he makes no reference to Elias in this regard, also takes the view that the emotions that once might have been articulated via carnival are matters that now have to be given expression in other ways. In his theorisation of the 'carnival of crime' Presdee suggests that:

... without a partly licensed carnival forum to satisfy our second life, it emerges more haphazardly, unrehearsed and often unannounced. Moreover, explosions of carnival into the social field only represent aspects of the carnival; complete carnivals do not (cannot) spontaneously erupt, and if they do they are seen... as riot. (2000: 46)

Many of the people involved the riots were undoubtedly stimulated by, and then carried on by, the excitement and thrill of the possibilities opened up by the breakdown of order. However, the extent to which they set out with such an intention is rather more doubtful. Rather the 'quest for excitement' was in some ways less of a journey toward a particular goal (excitement or ecstasy) than an unfolding set of experiences in which an initial buzz, or a sense of an opportunity for such thrills, offered a stimulus to continued involvement. Here, a young, male Londoner describes precisely such a set of experiences:

We got chased by the police, which got my adrenalin levels going, and, dare I say it, I'm 24 years old, but I got a little excited by it, a little bit by the danger and also being chased. So, I'm a little bit of an idiot. And then afterwards we got a bit more excited, then I got a bit more daring.

For some of the rioters – rather like Presdee's account of the big joyriding-related disturbances of the early 1990s – their involvement was a symbolic retaking of territory (we return to this below) in a way that involved a form of street performance, games of 'cat and mouse' with the police, and the construction of 'an identity of excitement and opposition' (Presdee, 2000: 51) that many experienced more as 'carnival' than 'criminal' or, at least, experienced both as 'carnival' and 'criminal'.

Anger, fear and disappointment

A focus on the 'quest for excitement' could easily lead to the assumption that the disorder was otherwise purposeless; that the only, or at least the overriding, concern was thrill-seeking. This, however, was far from the case. Although the carnivalesque excitement of 'riot' was a powerfully expressed element of the experience by a large number involved it was far from the only emotion they discussed. The overwhelming impression gained from reading lengthy interviews with 270 rioters is one of anger - directed, in particular, toward, the police: 'basically my time to show, like to show my anger. That's why I went there' [18-year old female, London]. A strong view, expressed by many, was that much of what occurred in the riots was a means of expressing a deep, often visceral hostility toward the police, and this was articulated by respondents in all the main areas the research covered: London, Birmingham, Manchester, Salford and Liverpool. Such anger extended to others, particularly those in power who, it was felt, often misused their positions and were rarely if ever held to account (this is discussed in detail in xxxx, 2015). Such anger came from respondents of all ages. In part the anger toward the police stemmed from the shooting that preceded the rioting, and a sense that this was another injustice that would never be righted:

Murdering scum, it's like, you fucking, you think you can do what you's want. Get away with anything. You can fucking run around killing people. I was there, I know from the past, from a relative, who got shot, innocently, in East London, and that's when I, that's when I was standing with the police fucking giving them verbal abuse. 'You think you's can run around'. I even remember shouting about Mr Mendez [sic], the Brazilian guy, down in Stockwell, who got innocently shot...I know all the injustices that they police do, it's like, horrendous, like, and they can just stand there with their ignorance, and get away with anything they bloody well want and nothing's done about it. [42-year old male, London]

The antagonism towards the police articulated by the rioters varied in intensity – from poor relations and negative experience on the one hand to outright, violent hatred on the other. The origins of such feelings varied but included historically poor police-community relations, an inherited distrust of the police as an institution, and the more immediate issue of the poor treatment that many respondents felt they received at the hands of the police. Although the anger felt by the rioters is not central to our argument here, we raise it at this point, in part, because this feeling was a primary motivation bringing many of the 'rioters' out on to the streets, as well as also underpinning many of the other emotions they experienced during the disorder. Whilst some commentators have focused on the widespread looting that occurred during the 2011 riots – and it clearly was an extremely important feature – in arguing that such activity represents the disorder's most obviously distinguishing feature many such accounts have consequently underplayed the extent of the anger that underpinned much of the disorderly activity (xxxx et al, 2015). As one respondent

put it, 'you don't get that many people that angry just cos they want to go robbing' [22-year old male, Manchester].

For a proportion of those involved, the initial excitement and enthusiasm that surrounded the experience of the disorder began to give way to a mixture of fear – for themselves and for others – and, for some, disappointment at the perceived displacement of the original protests by other types of activity. In part, as the following respondent describes, fear was one of several emotions felt simultaneously – fear and excitement being quite closely related (Rosenberg, 1990) – as the disorder intensified. In the early stages of the disorder, when police numbers were relatively low, many rioters experienced a huge rush of excitement at the possibilities that confronted them. Once the potential consequences of their actions became more evident, some at least became significantly more concerned: 'because at that time there was like no police so I weren't scared. But then when all the police were around I was like, "Oh my god, what have I done?" [15-year old female, London] Or, as this young man put it:

At first you get there and you'd like think it's exhilarating. It's kind of a, you just get there and you think, whoa, this is like not normal! But then by the end it starts getting a little scary when you realise what can go wrong, and all the people that was getting arrested....' [19-year old male, Manchester]

For others, especially as the rioting developed, it was fear that came to the fore as the scale of the destruction and violence became evident, as demonstrated by the change in attitude of a 15-year old in Birmingham who had originally felt that 'yeah this is sick [crazy, awesome]' but over time realised that 'everything was just out of control and then anything could happen, you could easily get stabbed or anything'. A realisation that some rioters had little regard for the lives of others was also another understandable cause of anxiety: 'It was scary because people were just throwing anything like bins they were just throwing them it was scary in case you got hit because they didn't care they was just throwing them if you were there you were going to get hit.' [17-year old female, Liverpool]

For others, in particular those most obviously protesting the Mark Duggan shooting, the feeling that emerged as the riots progressed was a sense of sadness and regret. For some the sense of disappointment stemmed from a realisation that the riots no longer reflected what they considered to be their original ideals or intentions and instead had been 'overtaken' by something else. One 23-year old male in London described to us how his initial feelings of excitement quickly gave way to despair as he felt the riots changed character, losing an initial sense of rebellion and quickly turning to burning down the houses of 'innocent people'. This, he said, made him 'sick to my stomach'. This disappointment was most closely felt in Tottenham where a number of observers expressed feelings of regret that the riots had been 'misused' and, critically, that the cause of the original protest had been forgotten. Some felt this occurred quite quickly and they could detect a change in the nature of those out on the streets by the end of the first night of rioting. As the following respondent described it:

When I first saw [the rioting] I thought obviously people was doing it for the right reasons, that a young man has been killed in Tottenham, there's not no one's had any answers and that people have had enough and said nah we want answers now. And then it seemed to go from that to let's do whatever we want and as soon as it got to that point I decided I weren't gonna go out onto the street because I felt that it was too dangerous... This is a different identity to the identity you had when the initial protestors and rioters came along. The initial identity, even though there was criminal elements, that was the minority... When you get to eight o'clock in the morning now

you're starting to see the actions of opportunists, entrepreneurs and so on and so forth. [23-year old male, London]

As implied in the quote above, many respondents were particularly critical of the looting, viewing it as unjustified and as a distraction from the main focus of the rioting. For those in north London that focus was, at least initially, the shooting and the sense that the police would not be held to account:

Looting wasn't the way. Cos I don't think Mark would have wanted that. The family didn't want that. It makes the family look sort of bad. It took away from Mark Duggan's murder and the Government saw....well you're more interested in the riots. Where, there's a murder here' [41 year old male]

The shooting of Mark Duggan had less resonance outside London and, consequently, was less frequently mentioned by rioters. Similar concerns emerged, however, though they were more likely to be articulated as generalised anger and frustration with the police. Once again, however, it was the case that initial protests, which tended to take the form of violent confrontation against the police, were felt to be somewhat undermined by some of the behaviour during the riots. In Nottingham – where the disorder was less widespread, but where there were concerted attempts to attack the police – one rioter observed: 'because people took [the riots] out of context, and started looting and stuff, the whole police being corrupt thing didn't actually get across, and the police haven't had to answer'. [17-year old female, Nottingham] The anger that prompted some people to take to the streets to protest (violently or otherwise) was, many felt, supplanted by an opportunistic spirit that had, in their view, little in the way of political motivation. One respondent, a 29-year old man from Kilburn in north London, for example, was especially critical of the nature of the rioting in his borough, arguing that the rioters had failed to engage in something meaningful:

I don't know why they never burn down the police station. They shoulda burned it down. I feel bad because everyone else was on some Mickey Mouse thing. It lost its political spirit... It lost its political emotion. And it just went right to, just havoc.

This view was perhaps captured most succinctly by the following London respondent who said that in his opinion after the initial protest 'everyone started forgetting why they were doing it and just started doing it for fun and stuff' [17-year old male, London]. Whilst there is undoubtedly something in this, there are also at least two difficulties with this perspective. The first, as already illustrated, is that at all points there were undoubtedly multiple motivations, and multiple emotions, evident in the rioting. It is quite possible that the balance and tenor of the disorder, as well as the nature of the conduct, shifted over time, and there is some evidence for this. Excitement and anger were especially visible early on, to be replaced by fear and disappointment in some cases (but only some cases) later. But it is important not to overstate the nature and significance of any such shift for few clear patterns could be detected in participants' accounts. Second, and equally importantly, the reality was that in many cases individual rioters also held and displayed multiple motivations and experienced the riots in a variety of ways (for an extended discussion see xxxx et al, 2015). Not only must we be wary of reducing the 'nature' of the riots to any single, overriding factor so, equally, we should similarly avoid assuming that individuals caught up in the disorder displayed single or simple motivations. The emotions discussed thus far are complex. Many talked of the excitement and the thrill of rioting. They also talked of anger, especially toward the police, but also toward other powerful groups. Some of the excitement, of course, came from the unusual possibilities opened up by the disorder, not the least of which was the ability to give vent to their anger. For some, the anger either subsequently

gave way to, or was increasingly accompanied by fear, both of what might happen to them and might happen to others affected by the disorder. Finally, for some, particularly those involved in the very earliest disturbances in north London, there was a growing sense of disappointment or disenchantment as they felt the element of protest gradually got lost as the extent of the violence and the looting grew.

A sense of control

As suggested above, for many involved in the riots, the disorder was an opportunity for payback, for some sort of revenge against a police service they viewed with great hostility. As anticipated by the social psychological literature on riots (Stott and Reicher, 1998) the experience of the 2011 riots for many of those heavily involved gave them a sense of empowerment as a result of a brief role reversal – momentarily experiencing the feeling of having the upper hand over the police. This sense of power and, significantly, its apparent novelty for a large proportion of interviewees tied into wider feelings of exclusion experienced by many rioters (Ferguson 2011; Taylor *et al.* 2011). In this context, participation in the riots was often explained as an expression of anger and frustration at this social invisibility, an outlet for those who felt they did not have access to other, more obviously legitimate channels of communication or complaint. The ways in which such rioters talked had resonances with elements of Stephen Lyng's notion of 'edgework'. Lyng (1990: 860) argued that the participants in most of the activities he studied claimed to have experienced a sense of 'self-realization', 'self-actualization' or 'self-determination'. By this he meant that the activities led to a heightened, or as he put it, 'purified and magnified', sense of self. Phrases like 'I felt really alive' abound. The sequence of emotions in such activity, he suggested, begins with fear, and moves to exhilaration and omnipotence. Participants in edgework, he argued, develop a pronounced sense of their own competence as a consequence of an illusory sense that they are able to control the fateful aspects of the activity. Without wishing to stretch the parallels too far, a similar issue of 'control' appears within the rioters' narratives, for although the context is very different from the experiences that Lyng describes, many of the rioters talked about achieving a sense of empowerment beyond that they might ordinarily experience.

This sense of empowerment was illustrated in two broad ways. In the first rioters talked about physical territory and, more particularly, about their relationship with the police. Empowerment, expressed in this way, tended to involve descriptions of taking (or regaining) control of local streets. These were invariably described as *their* streets, and the regaining of control was from the police who ordinarily had charge of them or, additionally, were seen as attempting to occupy them during the riots. Territory, community and neighbourhood were mentioned frequently, and the defence of space against the police was a common theme. As this 23-year old man from London put it: 'the general feel of it was, basically that when I spoke to one kid he basically said I'm here to show the police that these are our streets and they're not taking them from us'. As the following 18-year old man from Birmingham describes, this was experienced by some as an opportunity to take advantage, albeit briefly, of a turning of the tables:

[The police are] pinpointing the main areas like Handsworth, Aston, most of the black communities, you don't see 'em pointing out any white communities in Birmingham, you get me, so, I was getting back at the police for that. For everything aint it...it was an opportunity, we was the ones in power, so, we was showing our authority, By throwing stuff and running them off, you know what.

Occupied in this way, rioters described a sense of unity – in part as a consequence of being united against the police – but also, as highlighted earlier, feeling they were surrounded by kindred spirits from their neighbourhood:

One of the things that struck me was the way that a lot of people who obviously didn't know each other were I dunno, kinda clubbing together in a way ya know, there was, ya know, we've had all this crap about loving Manchester and saving the community's spirit but I saw a more community spirit that night then I've seen in Manchester in a long time. People ya know, were speaking about where to go and talking about where the police were and ya know, there wasn't any great strategy to it but ya know, people were clubbing together ... I thought that was a good thing. [28-year old male, Manchester]

The second way in which empowerment was discussed was more obviously existential in character and was described as a feeling of experiencing greater control in their lives. Empowerment, even when focused primarily on physical territory and attempting to outwit the police, also tended to involve such personal reflection – albeit that they weren't the primary focus in such accounts. As one 16-year old from Birmingham put it, '[w]hat I really noticed that day was that we had control. It felt great. We could do what we wanted to do. We could do as much damage as we can, and we could not be stopped'. This sense of empowerment was personally expressed – as a feeling of relative impunity, of freedom of action, and of power that, for some, bordered on invulnerability. Here, one young 22-year old man from Manchester offers his view of looting: 'and if they feel that the only way they can empower themselves against something that is so corrupt and so fucking...makes you feel so worthless, if that's the only thing they feel like they can do, then fair play to them'. Again, central to this feeling of invincibility was a sense of power over the police. Not only did those involved quickly realise that the police were often ill-equipped to deal with the scale of the disorder facing them, but they talked about it being the first time that they had experienced the possibility of inflicting on the police the same feelings of fear and dread that they regularly experienced: 'For once it felt like you had so much power... it was the sense of power that shocked me. I've never seen police so scared before' (15 year old female, Clapham). As Reicher and Stott (2011) put it, riots 'turn knaves into Kings for a day and make Kings defer to knaves'.

Rioters described feeling impregnable, perceiving themselves to be (temporarily) untouchable by all forms of authority. As one 24-year old man from Peckham in south London said, 'kind of made me feel like ahh like, oh fuck it, we're not going to get caught...you kind of got this invincibility complex you know... that's kind of how I felt, like I could do whatever I wanted and there would be no repercussions'. That so many rioters were out on the streets with little to mask their identities despite the almost ubiquitous presence of closed-circuit television is perhaps partly a reflection both of the excitement and lack of inhibition involved but also this sense of invulnerability that so many appear to have experienced. This new, albeit temporary, sense of power was reflected in the rioters' use of liberation language as they described the freedom that they felt from the oppression which they perceived to characterise their daily life 'I felt good because that's the only time that you can feel freedom [Q: To get freedom?] Yeah freedom. We felt free at that time. Nobody could hold you back' [19-year old male, Birmingham]. Often utilising the language of war, battle lines were clearly drawn out between themselves and 'authority', and in particular the police 'It felt like a battle actually. Felt like a battle... Cos it was police against us and for the first time we felt like we could actually take them on, without getting jumped by six or seven police officers' [20-year old male, Regents Park].

Not only did this feeling of control in the face of the police bring a sense of power, but for some rioters it also evoked a sense of achievement, with one 19 year old female in Croydon commenting that this 'battle' felt 'good' as at last 'we could actually show them that we are capable of taking action if we don't get a right to speak, if we don't get a right to put our ideas forward...'. This sense of achievement did not just apply to those who were at the forefront of the riots but, for a 46 year old male in Salford, was something

which applied to many who were involved in less conspicuous ways: 'there were probably many people who only threw one brick but they was chuffed really like they had thrown a brick at a police van and like nothing happen...there was actually like a little smile like they had achieved something for once in their life, a little bite back at the system'. The feeling of personal achievement, however briefly experienced, was reinforced for many involved by a sense of watching, or being part of, something that was of significant and lasting importance, of being part of the 'spectacle'. It was something new and being there, whether on the sidelines or in front of police lines was momentous. As one 17-year old from Peckham, south London said: 'Now I'm in it. Like, there's something to tell, like, the other generation because like my granddad told me about the Broadwater Farm riots. My dad told me about the Brixton riots, and now, like, I can tell my son, my daughters about oh yeah, the riots that happened [in 2011].' To a degree, involvement in the riots was, as Hayward (2004: 155) puts it in relation to other forms of criminal activity, both 'a way both of seizing control and expressing identity'. As with Lyng's participants in edgework, one of the temporary consequences of involvement in the riots was to experience themselves as 'instinctively acting entities, [leaving] them with a purified and magnified sense of self' (1990: 860).

'The best three days of my life'

The emotional experience of the riots was very mixed, with respondents talking about the anger that motivated them, the fear that emerged (for some) as the disorder unfolded, and the disappointment experienced by those for whom the protest element was gradually drowned out by other activities and actions. Latterly, we focused on the sense of empowerment that many of the rioters experienced – a temporary feeling of control, over events and others, that added to the excitement and exhilaration of the experience of disorder. We suggested that the empowerment many rioters experienced gave them, however fleetingly, what in the context of edgework Lyng (1990) refers to as a 'heightened sense of self'. Moreover, Lyng goes on to argue that this enhanced self-conception 'is the direct antithesis of that under conditions of alienation and reification' and is a consequence of situations where 'their behaviour is not coerced by the normative or structural constraints of their social environment' (1990: 878). This observation, and more particularly it seems to us, his invocation of the notion of alienation is potentially of some help in understanding some rioters' accounts of their motivations, their actions, and their emotional experiences during the disorder. More particularly, the notion of alienation helps ground these accounts in the broader socio-economic and structural environment from which the bulk of the rioters were drawn (in this regard see Anderson, 1999), offering the possibility of what Ray (2014: 132) describes as an explanation that combines 'emotionality and its capacity for mobilization via specific triggers'.

Though explicit reference to the idea of alienation has been much less common since its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, there is good reason to see it as a theme of continuing importance within social science research, albeit often under the guise of other terminology (Seeman, 1983). In his discussion of edgework, Lyng utilises an understanding of alienation that takes the traditional Marxist focus on the limitations of the experience of work under conditions of capitalism and broadens it to include the absence of opportunities for 'creative, skilful, self-determining action' beyond the workplace (Lyng, 1990: 877). In his review of empirical work in this field, Seeman (1975) identifies at least six varieties of approach to understanding alienation, including those that focus primarily on: powerlessness; meaninglessness; normlessness; cultural estrangement; self-estrangement; and, social isolation. Thus far, the rioters' accounts discussed here have, it might be argued, suggested elements both of 'powerlessness' (the disorder offering a fleeting experience of power and control in lives in which they are otherwise felt to be absent or rare) and 'normlessness' (riots enabling some participants the experience of momentary pleasures as a result of the breakdown of everyday regulatory controls). Arguably, however, there is more to it than this and we want briefly to suggest that rioters' accounts of their experiences and emotions suggest that their participation gave,

necessarily temporarily, a form of meaningfulness, almost purpose and, however ironically, a quality of life that they rarely experienced in their 'normal' lives, and offered a temporary release from problems of self-estrangement and their everyday social isolation.

The evidence that the rioters were predominantly drawn from our poorest communities, and displayed a great many of the characteristics associated with social exclusion, is overwhelming. Of the 66 local authority areas that experienced some disorder – albeit very low level in some cases – 30 were in the top 25% most deprived areas in England, including 15 in the top 25 poorest areas. Similarly, data on the first 1500 people arrested and charged as a consequence of the riots found that they were significantly more likely to come from areas of high deprivation – with approximately 70% coming from one of the 30% most deprived areas (Riots, Victims and Communities Panel, 2011). Ministry of Justice data showed that almost two-thirds of the young people for whom data were available lived in one of the most deprived areas as defined by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Indices (IDACI), whilst only three percent lived in the 20% least deprived (MoJ, 2011). Using data on almost 1,700 'rioters' obtained from the Metropolitan Police, and then mapping their addresses, Kawalerowicz and Briggs (2015: 19) concluded that deprivation was significant to any explanation for variation in involvement across London and that the 'probability of rioters increased with deprivation both in the immediate neighbourhood and in the wider area' (see also Lightowlers, 2015).

Given this, perhaps predictably many of the respondents articulated a sense of disaffection, a sense of social isolation with limited attachments and investments. 'Social isolation' as referred to here is, in effect, the under-integration of the individual in wider social structures and institutions (Durkheim, 1947). They talked about lives in which they had limited resources, no job, antagonistic relations with police, felt generally powerless and frustrated, with the consequence that participating in rioting was an easy choice to make. Rarely did this involve any attempt at rationalisation or self-justification, with many talking openly about their violence, destruction and their absence of regret. Indeed, rather than expressing any remorse, they were much more likely to talk of their enjoyment.

I ain't bothered, it was done, I actually enjoyed the bits that I was there, and the regrets yeah I could have got arrested but you fear in getting arrested, but once you are arrested you are arrested thats the way it is isn't it. You do your best to try and not get arrested but if you get arrested you get arrested but what does it matter. I will go and visit a few friends I haven't seen for a bit as they are probably life'd up or doing a long time. [46-year old male, Salford]

Such views say something important about the broader mind-set of some of those involved for, as one 25-year old Asian man from London put it, 'when people get to the point where they don't care for the laws for the community, their neighbours and so on so forth, it says something about the state that we're living in and the state of their mentality...'. Strikingly a number of respondents, when reflecting back, talked excitedly about how important an event it had been for them. Rather than concern for others, or much emotional empathy, what they expressed was a sense that the riots were one of the most significant things they had ever been involved in. In short, beyond the fun and excitement that was to be had, the experience took on the quality of something of huge personal significance. As the following young man¹ from Merseyside put it:

¹ One of the very few respondents who refused to give his age

I was having a laugh I swear to god. It was like a dream, it was like a game. Do you know what I mean? It was better than a game. I was actually doing it. I felt alive there's no word to explain it. It was like that first day it happened will always be the best day of my life forever ever I swear to god.

For this young man the experience of rioting was so unusual, so distinct from everyday experience 'it was like a dream'. He was not alone in drawing parallels with (computer) games – both in terms of excitement and fun – though the pleasure was significantly increased because in this case he 'was actually doing it'. It is the final phrase he uses - 'the best day of my life forever' – on which we briefly want to conclude by focusing on one rioter's story. Daniel's² story, though at the extreme in some respects, nevertheless captures many aspects of the emotional side of the riots discussed in this article. At the time of the outbreak of disorder, Daniel was on holiday. Watching the images of the disorder on television he was both excited and felt an overwhelming desire to get involved. This was something he didn't want to miss out on. He continues his story as follows:

Soon as I saw [film of the riots] I was happy... This chance may never come again... Now was the opportunity to get revenge. It wasn't just the police, just the whole government like. Everything they do. They make things harder for us. Like, they make it hard for us to get jobs. Even like when we do get benefits they cut it down... I knew if we get back to England and we actually damage, like do a lot of damage to the point where, forget all the benefits they cut off, they'll have to pay like twenty times worse than that. So it was just our way of getting revenge.

Daniel's initial account talks of the excitement of the opportunity that presented itself, his worry about the possibility of missing out and his sense that he wished to take 'revenge' on the authorities – the police and the government – who 'make it hard for us'. Having returned from his holidays to join in the rioting, he gets involved in some of the destruction of property, 'I saw McDonalds get set on fire, and then it was completely set alight, and I've petrol bombed it, even though it was set alight. And I felt good.' His account then goes on to describe his involvement in the violence and rioting using, like a number of other respondents, the comparison with playing computer games. His account in many respects is not a deeply-felt emotional one, but one generally lacking in empathy and sympathy:

When we first got there we saw police. They had their shields up, running. So we thought, ok like, they're on the defensive. So we just sort of started picking up bricks and bottles and threw it at them. It felt good. It felt like "Call of Duty"³. It made me feel cold as well. I knew when I was doing it that that was someone's Mum or Dad, but I just didn't care about that. I just thought it was a chance to get revenge and I took it with both hands. It was a war and for the first time we was in control. We had the police scared, innit. There was no more us being scared of the police. We actually had a choice of letting officers off the hook or seriously injuring them. Like, I threw a brick at a policewoman. I saw her drop. I could easily have bricked her again. I didn't because it was a woman... I wasn't there for the robbin'. I was there for revenge.

Daniel had been extensively involved in the rioting, in several locations, and had been engaged in some of the more extreme violence and destruction. When asked to look back on the experience, to talk about he now felt about it, his lack of empathy with others, and the absence of remorse, continued. In fact, and

² Daniel is not his real name. His account is taken from an extended re-interview conducted as part of *Reading the Riots* for broadcast on BBC2's *Newsnight*. The film in which his account appears can be found at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/9656166.stm> (last accessed 21.6.15)

³ A computer game, that comes in various formats, that simulates the first-person experience of warfare.

reflecting what a number of rioters had to say, Daniel's sense was that this marked a special, almost magical moment for him. It was something to look back on, and consequently stood in very significant contrast with much of the rest of his life. In a powerful end to his account of his involvement in the riots he said:

I'll always remember the day that we had the police and the government scared. For once they were living on the edge, they like felt how we felt. They felt threatened by us. *That was the best three days of my life.* (emphasis added)

His account – with its absence of any strong emotional engagement with the violence, his sense of detachment both from others and indeed his sense at one stage of standing outside himself whilst he engaged in some of the very worst of the violence – speaks strongly, it seems to us, of the 'social isolation' and 'self-estrangement' – what Touraine (1971) described as a form of deprivation of awareness consequent on the 'dependent participation' central to post-industrial society - that are important indicators of significant levels of alienation (Geyer, 1980; Smith and Baum, 2008). There is now a lengthy history of work that suggests that it is often those who are structurally isolated, and who carry a subjective sense of powerlessness and disengagement, that are regularly to be found in significant social disorder (see, for example, Ransford, 1968). This does not in itself explain riots, but it does help to make sense of the attraction some participants feel toward the opportunities offered by the breakdown in order. To this extent, elements of what occurred on the streets of London and other English cities in August 2011 have parallels with many of the urban riots of the past half-century. The particular circumstances of the riots of course differed from previous major disorder, and they played out in varying ways, none of which would entirely parallel earlier riots (xxx et al, 2015). Nevertheless, and very much in line with previous studies, from the little that has been written from the viewpoint of those involved it seems plausible to us that the 2011 riots contained many of the same psychological, emotional and social characteristics that have been, or would be likely to have been, found in earlier disturbances (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1988: 284).

Conclusion

This brief examination of the 2011 riots from the point of view of some of those involved not only reveals the complexity of such 'experiences' but also raises a number of questions about the choices that those involved made. Why, for example, was it that so many were easily caught up in and felt drawn to these events despite the potential consequences for themselves and for others? In our view, the rioters' descriptions of what it *felt* like for them to be there begins to shed light on what it *meant* for them to be there. That is to say, engaging with the emotional experience of rioting offers another, potentially important, means of understanding why riots occur, and why they occur in the ways that they do.

In analysing the rioters' accounts we borrowed from Norbert Elias' theory of the civilizing process and its application to the arena of sport, as well as cultural criminology's concern with the experiential and performative character of transgression, to argue that the excitement felt and expressed by rioters was akin to the forms of exhilaration that might once have found expression via carnival. For many, however, the initial excitement and exhilaration was accompanied by, or sometimes quickly followed by, fear and disappointment. Often fear was initially masked by the thrill of the opportunities that the disorder offered but, eventually, an array of other matters – from the proximity of large numbers of police officers through to witnessing behaviour by other rioters that was felt to be dangerous or in some other way inappropriate – reminded those concerned of some of the risks involved. Not surprisingly perhaps, the most visible of the emotions expressed by rioters was anger. Anger at the police, and at others perceived as misusing their

positions for personal gain – MPs and bankers being mentioned most frequently – without any likelihood that they would ever be held to account. Such anger fuelled much of the violence and other criminal conduct, including some of the looting. As we have argued elsewhere (xxxx) looting in the context of riots ought, at least in part, be seen as a form of political violence (see also, Ray, 2014). Indeed, and linked with this, we would resist the characterisation of the riots as events of ‘objectless dissatisfaction’, suggesting that for some their involvement was an expression, at least in part, of a generalized discontent, and was part of a broader ‘political’ protest and one means of articulating their resentment of and anger toward the powerful and wealthy (see also, Ilan, 2015). Part of our argument here has been that a focus on emotions, and links to terminology such as ‘edgework’ and ‘carnival’, has the potential to illuminate some of the more affective aspects of the riots, a dimension that is often absent from discussion of such events. However, we would reiterate that this should not be interpreted as suggesting either that a focus on the affective character of riots should be the primary lens through which events should be understood or, alternately, as denying the ‘political’ elements in rioters’ motivations (see also Naegler, 2014).

Most fundamentally, our argument has been that the analysis of the emotional world of the riot needs to be grounded in an understanding of the structural circumstances from which the rioters were drawn and which frame their affective reaction to the events. The fleeting experiences reported by the rioters – of excitement and exhilaration, of power, of togetherness in the crowd and of an intensified sense of self – all served to highlight what ordinarily was missing. In short, the rioters’ accounts of their experiences reeked of alienation. This was captured most vividly in the phrase (or ones almost identical to it) – used by several respondents – that their involvement in the violence and destruction of the rioting had been ‘the best day of their life’. For the marginalised, angry young people involved in the disorder in August 2011 this phrase captured a sense of the very limited parameters of their lives thus far, the limited horizons and possibilities they saw as being realistically open to them in the future, and the social, cultural and economic distance they felt from the mainstream.

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