Differentiating English Rioters: An Exploratory Narrative Framework

Dominic Willmott and Dr. Maria Ioannou

International Research Centre of Investigative Psychology, University of Huddersfield

Dominic.Willmott@hud.ac.uk
Background
August 2011 Riots

- Met Police fatally shoot Mark Duggan, a young black male said to be unarmed

- Over next 4 days rioting spread throughout London

- Day 3 & 4 see’s disorder in Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds

- In Total 66 areas encountered incidents of rioting & looting with an estimated 15,000 individuals thought to have taken part

- Monetary cost estimated at around £500 million and the human cost equated to 5 deaths and over 200 police officers injured

(Riot Communities and Victim Panel, 2011)
• **Allport (1924) Convergent Explanation**
  – “the individual in the crowd behaves just as he would alone, only more so”

• **Blumer (1969) Implicit need for adventure**
  – Collective Emotional excitement stemming from arousing event

• **Zimbardo (1969) Deindividuation theory**
  – Loss of identity and subsequent loss of control in the presence of crowd

• **Reicher et al - Elaborated Social Identity Model**
  – Alongside a personal identity, individuals within a crowd also express social identities
Narrative Approach

- Within Psychology, over recent years has gained considerable attention and momentum, seen as a method of providing insight into an individual through examining the stories they tell.


  1. People construct and internalise stories to make sense of their lives.

  2. These autobiographical stories have enough psychological meaning and staying power to be told to others as narrative accounts.

  3. When examined by researchers, such narratives can be analysed for content themes, structural properties and functional attributes that speak to their Psychological, Social and Cultural meanings.
Canter (1994) proposed examination of the narrative accounts offenders provide when detailing their crimes, can offer important insights into understanding how they make sense of their criminality and general lives – termed “inner narratives”.

Presser (2009) suggested an offenders narrative to be an immediate antecedent to offending, shaped by experience and reflected in behaviour.

In a series of studies Canter et al, interviewed offenders across varying types of crime and found offenders typically expressed one of four dominate narrative themes when making sense of their crimes termed:

- **Revenger**
- **Victim**
- **Professional**
- **Hero / Adventurer**

These themes are thereby suggested to provide a general framework for differentiating offenders and may constitute a generalised set of dominant themes that all offenders draw upon when accounting for any given crime (Youngs & Canter, 2011).
The Present Study:

Research Aim:

- To determine whether the criminal narrative framework would identify distinct variants and thematic differences in rioters involved in the English riots, based upon the motivations they expressed for offending.
Methodology

Sample

- Secondary data collection
- 20 Rioter Narrative accounts
- 18 Male, 2 Female; Age range 16-39 (where known)
- Variety of offences within riots:
  - Property offences - Theft, Burglary, Criminal Damage, Arson
  - Violent offences - Assault, GBH, Affray
  - Public order offences – drunk and disorderly
Methodology

Procedure

- **Content Analysed** rioter narrative accounts to identify varying motivations given for offending

- Motivation variables then dichotomised for each case

- Subjected to a **Smallest Space Analysis (SSA)**
Smallest Space Analysis

- A form of multi-dimensional scaling whereby variables or factors feature as points in a visual space.

- Essentially allows the researcher to establish the relationship every variable has with every other variable.

- The closer two points are, the more frequently they co-occurred between cases.

- The geo-metric representation of these relationships provides the researcher with a simplified means of visually distinguishing groups or ‘themes’ of factors that cluster together...
## Content Analysis

**47 Motivations Variables identified**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monetary Gain</td>
<td>(65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Get Free Things</td>
<td>(60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show Police Lost Control</td>
<td>(55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfair Gov Policies</td>
<td>(50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payback On The Police</td>
<td>(45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For A Laugh</td>
<td>(45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display of Force</td>
<td>(45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing To Lose</td>
<td>(45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repay Ill Treatment</td>
<td>(40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry at Lack Of Jobs</td>
<td>(35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Gov Support</td>
<td>(35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel Impoverished</td>
<td>(35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance To Hurt Police</td>
<td>(30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Tuition Fees</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop &amp; Searched</td>
<td>(20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looting To Survive</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance to Get Drunk</td>
<td>(10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge Against Employers</td>
<td>(10%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two-dimensional Smallest Space Analysis (SSA) plot of Rioter Motivations without regional interpretation (coefficient of alienation = 0.15)
Two-dimensional Smallest Space Analysis (SSA) plot of Rioter Motivations with regional interpretation (coefficient of alienation= 0.15)
The ‘Professional’ Rioter

- **Task focused** individual
- Somewhat professional approach to crime calculating that periods of unrest to present unique opportunities to obtain their goals
- Involvement in *disorder centered around acquiring goods* for personal gain rather than to contribute to the disorder by rioting.
- Theoretically aligned with Allports (1924) Convergent explanation
  - Criminal behaviour within riots result of those involved already being of such character

“We had one motive, that was to get as many things as we can and sell it on...what I did was, go to phone shops, get as many phones as you can, sell them to [an online company that buys phones]... used someone else’s bank account ... Split between us, my part alone, I got two and a half grand. I don’t condone it [the looting] but like, it’s like, it’s helped me out financially...” (Case 20)
The ‘Adventurer’ Rioter

- **Thrill seeker** whose primary motivation for involvement in disorder is centered around obtaining pleasure and excitement.

- In contrast to the Professional rioter the Adventurer rioter is likely to be less concerned with taking measures to conceal their identity and weighing up the chances of getting caught.

- Theoretically, appears to align with Blumer’s (1969) Rioting for Fun
  - Collective emotional excitement around an unusual event.

“I was just a part of a big mob, it’s just cause as much trouble as you can and...[Shrugs his shoulders]. It was a lot better than sex, it was better than anything. You just couldn’t describe it cause you was in the atmosphere and you knew that it might not happen again, so you could just do it then and get away with it” (Case 13)
The ‘Revengeful’ Rioter

- **Task focused** individual who feels *compelled to riot to get revenge*

- Justifying criminal behaviour as somewhat *symbolic in nature* and grounded in a perceived grievance at the hands of the police and state policy

- In contrast to the Professional rioter, the Revengful rioter is *focused upon causing damage and harm* as an expression of force rather than achieving monetary gain

- Theoretically, appears to align with Reicher et al ESIM
  - Common feelings of injustice lead to formation of a collective group identity and need for action

“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, like we had the police scared init, like there was no more us being scared of the police. We actually had the choice of letting officers off the hook or seriously injuring them...I wasn’t there for the robbing, I was there for revenge...” (Case 9)
The ‘Victim’ Rioter

- Attributing involvement to an **external locus of control**, citing factors such as unfair government policies as the basis for their **need to engage in disorder**

- Portrays themselves as looting to survive and rioting due to having nothing to lose, likening themselves to a somewhat **helpless victim with no choice** but to commit crime

- Theoretically, appears to align with Reicher et al ESIM
  - Common feelings of victimisation leads to the formation of a collective group identity permitting subsequent collective criminality

“They should help all the single mothers that are struggling, uni cuts everything. Like come one, money wise init basically, this isn’t just like we’re doing it [looting] for the fun of it, we’re doing this for money to survive in this world, but until we get that or a little bit of support from the government it’s not gonna stop...” (Case 4)
Implications & Applications

- The presence of four differing rioter ‘types’ derived from the analysis, provides preliminary support for the utility of a narrative framework of differentiating rioters

- The research also offers a potential framework for integrating different explanations of rioting, across the range of different offenders involved

- Informing best practice for Policing differing variants of rioters – Descalation

- Informing CJS on punishment for differing rioter types – Recidivism

- Further supports the notion of a generalised Criminal Narrative Framework
Limitations & Future Research

- **Small Sample Size** – Need to test framework against much larger samples

- **Secondary data collection** – lacked complete demographic info

- **First hand interviews** - allow for greater freedom of questioning and more in-depth examination between rioters

- Future research may benefit from exploring historic rioter narratives in order to explore the **consistency and change** in rioting offending behaviour across time e.g. 1980’s vs. 2011
References

• Allport, F. H. (1924) *Social psychology*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co


