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### Knowing, communicating, sense making, place and urban disorder: young people and the 2011 riots

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## **Knowing, communicating, sense making, place and urban disorder: young people and the 2011 riots**

**Jamie Kesten, Karim Murji, Sarah Neal, Evelyn Ruppert**

### **Abstract**

In August 2011 rioting, or disorders, occurred in various towns and cities in England. Those events have been widely debated and analysed and a range of explanations, factors and understandings for them have been proposed. This paper reports on a small pilot research study that explored two distinctive elements. First, it focuses on the city of Milton Keynes, a place of ‘almost’ or ‘minor’ riots. Second, it is concerned with, but also seeks to extend and interrogate the view that digital technologies played a unique role in the occurrence and spread of disorders. The research drew on a focus group of 6 young people who were brought together twice to discuss their views on various aspects of events, locally and nationally. In this paper we present three main themes from the data we gathered: young people’s different ways of knowing about the riots and how they went about ‘working with’ and ‘thinking about’ their ways of knowing; the role that thrill seeking and sociality played alongside strong feelings of condemnation and ambivalence about the riots; and the impact of the policing of disorder and young people’s critical views of these approaches and of the police and rioters in general, as well as the ways in which race provides a framing for riots in Britain and elsewhere. We conclude by suggesting that despite some commonalities between our findings and those of other studies, our study is novel in highlighting the ways in which communication techniques, intra group social relations and youth-police relations are profoundly shaped by specific localities and riot geographies.

## **Knowing, communicating, sense making, place and urban disorder: young people and the 2011 riots**

### **Introduction**

Numerous accounts, explanations, and analyses have been written about events that happened across England between 6 and 11 August 2011 (Bassel 2012; Guardian/LSE 2011; Morell et al 2011; Murji and Neal 2011; Solomos 2011). Described as riots, disturbances, outbreaks, unrest and disorder, the events were initially triggered by the police shooting and death of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, North London and which then spread across the country to numerous cities such as Birmingham and Manchester. The spread of events across the country and the links to issues of race and policing in inner cities made the urban disorders of the 1980s a common frame of reference within which to understand the events of 2011 (Smith 2013). While the spread of riots in the 1980s were often treated as a ‘copy cat’ effect fanned by media coverage, this theme - while still present in the 2011 events - was supplemented with a novel element: the implied or imputed role of digital technologies in communicating about, even organising, crime and disorder in various locations. While much media and academic attention has focused on London and other major cities and the role of digital technologies in sparking unrest and facilitating its spread, this research sought to take a different approach.

First, we wanted to examine a *specific* location and setting - Milton Keynes - a location of ‘almost’ or ‘minor riots’ that did not seem to reach a threshold of being a ‘hot spot’ but where the media, police and local authorities reported ‘something’ took place. By focusing on a little studied location, we wanted to examine how young people experienced and interpreted the riots and emotionally and socially responded to what they understood was happening - and crucially, not happening - within their particular urban space and setting. As a new town on the fringes of London and famously built on a grid system, Milton Keynes is one of the fastest growing centres in Britain which provides a mixture of urban and suburban features, a diverse and mixed population, and an unusual geography which provide a context for our respondents views. Second, while social networking and smart phone technologies were reported to be a novel feature of the riots, we took the view that a focus on these alone obscures other ‘old’ and ‘new’ technologies and methods that may have been involved including ‘dumb phone’ technology such as texts and calls. Again, we wanted to bring attention to the *specific* ways that digital along with other technologies were mobilised by young people within a particular setting. These two aspects - the setting and the role of technologies - provided the frame for this research about riots, which inevitably, are located in a wider context about crime and disorder, race and policing and pleasure and danger. In turn all of those themes are refracted through the views of a group of young, relatively diverse and, to an extent, marginalised young people.

To explore these issues, we conducted a small qualitative pilot study between January and March 2012. It involved two focus group sessions with young people in Milton Keynes. The focus group used the same members. This ‘repeat interview’ technique allowed us to build up trust between the group and the researcher and more effectively explore their experiences, knowledge of and communication around the ‘riots’ that took place in Milton Keynes on 11 August 2011. This working paper is a summary of our main findings and some of the key themes that emerged. It is organised in four sections – an account of the methods we used, followed by three sets of findings from our respondents on technologies, and crime and policing. Kesten begins by summarising our methodology, describes the young people that participated in the research, and offers some brief reflections on particularly challenging

aspects of conducting research on young people and rioting. In the next sections three interpretations of themes that emerged from the focus groups are explored. Ruppert focuses on young people's different ways of knowing about the riots and how they went about 'working with' and 'thinking about' their methods. In section three Neal explores the how emotions of excitement, thrill seeking and sociality played alongside strong feelings of condemnation and ambivalence about the riots. In the final section Murji examines the impact of the policing of disorder and young people's critical views of these approaches and of the police and rioters in general. In the conclusion we draw together these findings and suggest a number of issues and approaches for further research.

## **1. The research methods**

Our first task was to identify and recruit young people to participate in the focus groups. We began by conducting semi-structured interviews with two youth workers in the Milton Keynes Council Youth Service (see Appendix 1). Based on their knowledge of what had occurred in Milton Keynes on the evening of 11 August 2011, they helped identify an appropriate location for conducting and recruiting young people to participate in the research. The Point youth centre in Central Milton Keynes was selected as the site as it is centrally located, easy to access via bus, and a popular meeting place for young people from across the city and indeed it had been a major gathering location on the night in question. Six young people were selected and included both genders, different ethnic backgrounds and education/employment statuses. They were aged between 14-18, three were male (Abdul, Brett, Justin) and three female (Anna, Leanne and Suzie). Four were white (Brett, Justin, Leanne, Suzie) and two were of mixed ethnic background (Anna, Abdul). Four had been excluded from school and, at the time of the research, were either not in education, employment or training, or receiving personalised support. Of the other two, one was attending a local college and the other secondary school. A seventh participant in the focus groups (Nicky) was a female youth worker of mixed ethnic background and in her 20s. We have changed all their names to preserve anonymity.

All were also regular attendees at The Point, had some knowledge related to the events of 11 August 2011 and were willing to participate in the research. To varying degrees all six came from disadvantaged social backgrounds, had been out of mainstream schooling at some point in time (with four outside of schooling at the time of the focus groups). Several had been in trouble with the police in the past (three on a fairly regular basis with one still wearing an electronic tag at the time of the first focus group) and were regular recreational drug users (primarily alcohol and marijuana).

Focus groups were conducted in two stages with the young people. The first involved a general exploration of what they had heard and knew about and how they came to hear or know about the riots in Milton Keynes. They were asked what technologies they had used to confirm what was or was not happening, whether (and if so how) they used and interpreted the different kinds of data that they accessed (such as radio, phone calls, texts, BBM, twitter, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube etc.), which of these were most important, how the various technologies and data differently informed their understandings of the riots in MK and their views on the role of various technologies during the riots.

The second focus group was held ten days later and involved presenting the young people with our reflections on the first one, as well as seeking their thoughts on a number of methods and technologies used by the media, police and others to communicate and interpret the riots in Milton Keynes and beyond. Four methods were used. A mapping exercise engaged participants in the visualisation of their movements on the day of the riots followed by a group discussion. Police crime maps for the local area and national media maps for England were used to explore their thoughts on what these revealed about the riots. Local media and

police accounts and images of the riots in Milton Keynes on YouTube and online local newspaper stories were presented to explore their reactions to media representations and how these related to their own experiences and understandings. Finally, a Guardian interactive timeline of riot ‘tweets’ was displayed to prompt discussion on the use and role of social networking platforms in the spread of knowledge and rumours around the riots.

Generally, the repeated focus group technique was effective and successful in establishing a collective and animated conversation between the group members; in building rapport in the researcher’s relationship with the participants and for addressing our research questions. However, three issues arose that should be noted when considering the findings. The youth workers were invaluable in identifying participants and helping with many other arrangements. However, council policy required that a youth worker (‘Nicky’) be present during the focus groups and this had a notable impact upon the dynamics of the focus groups. In several ways her presence was beneficial as she served to validate or ‘vouch for’ the research. There were several instances where she was able to elicit a more detailed response to discussion topics, presumably as a result of her existing relationships with some of the participants and her position of authority and respect as a member of the youth work team. There were also occasions where Nicky’s presence was invaluable when dealing with behaviour that was challenging or unruly. However, at times this control also impinged on the ability of the young people to speak freely as it was clear, for example, that she held certain expectations about the use of inappropriate language, which served to formalise the focus groups somewhat. There were times when Nicky would misinterpret or misconstrue attempts to elicit responses or the meaning of a question and then pass this on to the participants. Managing this dynamic required delicately balancing the necessity and value of her presence while minimising her control of the process.

The activities and visual methods used in the second focus group proved mostly fruitful but the mapping exercise was particularly challenging yet at the same time revealing about the young people’s spatial knowledge. Despite conveying very vivid and detailed accounts of their movements on the day of the riots at the first focus group, all of the young people found it difficult to relate this (or indeed to relate much at all) to a paper map of Milton Keynes. Some of the participants mentioned, less than positively, how the exercise felt a lot like school (which the majority of them no longer attended). Also, gaining an accurate picture of their individual routes and activities on the day also proved very difficult as they all wanted to confer with each other, particularly those who had been together on the day. The screening of YouTube clips, police and national media crime maps and data and local press reports and images of the incidents was invaluable in prompting lively discussion and debate amongst the participants that would not have been possible otherwise.

Finally, the dynamics of the group were a challenge at times as it included both very vocal and very quiet individuals and those who found it difficult to sit still or engage in group activities. There were also clear divisions within the group of those who were and were not friends outside of the focus group, a fact pointed out by participants themselves. As a result, ensuring that all participants were heard equally was not always easy and despite the researcher’s best efforts some participants contributed to discussions more than others.

In the remainder of the paper we discuss the ways in which focus group conversations shed light on young people and their communication and riot talk; emotions and riot experience and relationships to the police.

## **2. Methods of knowing riots**

The Guardian/LSE research into the 2011 English riots and related research undertaken such as that conducted by the Manchester e-Research Centre (MeRC) paid much attention to digital

and smart phone technologies as a novel feature. In contrast and as our starting point we sought to examine the role that digital technologies played in this *specific* locality vis-à-vis *other methods* of knowing the riots used by young people. From ‘dumb phone’ technologies such as mobile texts and landline calls to word of mouth and witnessing, we wanted to know *how* young people knew about what was taking place in Milton Keynes and beyond. For instance, while Twitter was not at all a factor for our focus group participants, digital technologies of various kinds were mentioned as contributing to the riots:

**Jamie:** So what was your impression of how important digital technologies were during the riots?

**Abdul:** It made the riots.

**Jamie:** How so, explain?

**Abdul:** None of us watch the news. If we didn’t have our phones how are we ever going to know about it? We’re not going to know about it, it’s simple.

**Suzie:** I just agree with Abdul, like text and phone calls just started the riots to be honest.

**Leanne:** I think if it weren’t for that then they would have been smaller than what it was. I think it made it a bit larger.

At the same time, digital technologies were only one of a number of methods our participants used to both know and interpret what was happening in Milton Keynes. Young people deployed a mix of methods not translatable into a coherent or linear account of what they understood was happening on the evening in question. Indeed, they deployed an approach that followed logic similar to that known in the social sciences as ‘triangulation’ (Olsen 2004). Instead of studying a phenomenon with one method, several methods are used such that results can be compared and corroborated. In a sense this can be understood as a way of having ‘trust’ in the results as more-or-less accurate reflections of a phenomenon. Another rationale is that different methods are necessary to uncover different aspects of a phenomenon and broaden and deepen understanding, an argument that is often advanced when quantitative and qualitative methods are combined.

But there is another way of thinking that understands different methods as having ‘social lives’. In brief, methods involve distributed relations between numerous people and technologies and instead of different perspectives they not only represent but enact different versions of phenomena (Law, Ruppert and Savage 2010). In this way of thinking the results of different methods cannot be simply compared for their relative accuracy. Instead, the relations and norms that make up methods need to be understood so that evaluations and judgements of their claims can be made.

While these arguments are made in relation to social science research, our study found them to be relevant to understanding how young people worked with and thought about different methods of knowing and enacting what was happening in Milton Keynes on the night of 11 August 2011. In ‘working with’ methods they scrutinised accounts in relation to who and how knowledge was communicated with the understanding that these relations performed different conceptions of what was happening. In ‘thinking about’ methods they generally distrusted mediated accounts - virtual or verbal - such that observational methods or ‘seeing for themselves’ and ‘being there’ were in the end their most trusted methods.

## **Working with methods**

The participants initially heard about what was happening through a variety of methods: from friends via BBM and Facebook, the TV news, and from their parents and other relatives, and strangers via face-to-face contact, phone calls or text messages. They typically stated they ‘heard that...’ something was happening through one of these methods. But such hearing was in the first instance treated with caution. In part this was due to wildly variable accounts of what was happening: from being ‘told’ that there were 200 people rioting (Justin), that ‘The Hub and The Point were on fire’ (Suzie) to ‘hearing’ that ‘the City was shut down completely, raided with Police and all that crap’ (Abdul). These accounts came to be treated more as ‘rumours’ that were interpreted and transformed as they travelled via different methods or, as one young person put it, circulated like a ‘Chinese whisper’:

**Jamie:** So were there any other ways that you heard about things, like methods of hearing things?

**Justin:** Ears. Chinese whispers.

**Jamie:** People talking to you directly?

**Nicky:** It was like Chinese whispers wasn’t it?

**Justin:** Yeah, sort of, it kind of was... And if it goes on like a Chinese whisper someone else is going to get the wrong end of the stick and then tell all this shit to everybody else because that’s what they think they know.

Indeed the ‘excess’ of online Twitter rumours also left the police baffled. Interviews with police officers revealed how they struggled to sort rumour from fact and how reports on social networks only lead to confusion over where to deploy resources (Prasad and Adegoke 2012). For our participants, different accounts were scrutinised by either evaluating the trustworthiness of the source (‘someone I hang about with every day’ (Anna)) or by hearing the same thing from several people (Justin) or other methods such as from a parent (Brett) or on the news (Justin). They certainly did not rely upon Twitter:

**Brett:** I don’t like twitter. I can’t stand that twitter shit.

**Justin:** I think I made a twitter yeah just to follow some chick.

At the same time some acknowledged that they were also participants in passing on rumours:

**Anna:** I probably would have told someone else.

**Brett:** Yeah I told people like when I found out about it I spoke to all of these, and met up with these (referring to Anna and Justin). I just rang people like...

**Jamie:** So it was a case of hearing something and passing it on?

**Anna:** Yeah.

But for others, passing on information was only done when it was from people who were trusted witnesses:

**Anna:** No, I knew it was true. I knew people that were involved, that had done it, and then they rang me, and I knew people that were standing there watching it.

Official sources fared no better in the making of trust such as when they interpreted maps of the riots produced by *The Guardian* after the disturbances or television news coverage. They explained the absence of Milton Keynes as an ‘incident’ by noting that for the media it was too small or unimportant to be a matter of concern. They explained differences between their understanding of what happened and those of television and newspaper accounts as an instance of the media and police controlling the message:

**Anna:** They’re not going to tell everything.

**Abdul:** They’re painting a bad picture of us. Obviously things were fucked up but still. But they didn’t do a good job either did they?

**Jamie:** So there’s an element of control that the police have over the media is that what you’re saying?

**Abdul:** Of course!

But overall, mediated accounts – from crime maps to television broadcasts - threw them more into confusion and did not resolve any continuing uncertainty about what ‘really’ did happen. Instead, there was a general distrust of police reports, media, and also mediated communications.

Evaluating different methods thus came down to understanding relations ‘behind’ accounts - of parents, friends, strangers, police or media - and their tactics or trustworthiness. Indeed, accounts from unknown sources held little sway and no one method-text messaging or phone call or newspaper - was deemed more reliable than another. The participants thus worked with multiple and mixed methods of knowing that were not translatable into a coherent or simple account of what they understood was happening on the evening in question. Some ways of knowing were presented to them (my mum, text message) and others they pursued (phone, text message) but the ordering of their knowing could not be simply summarised in a straightforward narrative. It is not that they were incoherent (which implies a failure to be coherent and the absence of a single logic) but that their accounts were often non-coherent (Law 2011). They used a patchwork of heterogeneous bits of knowledge that simply did not add up (as the sometimes exacerbated focus group leader expressed). In the face of such an indeterminate mix what did they do? For almost all of the participants the method of verification was observational: just going there and seeing for themselves (as also noted in the section on Race and Policing Disorder). That is, in ‘thinking about’ methods they generally distrusted mediated accounts - virtual or even face-to-face - such that ‘seeing for themselves’ was the endgame.

### **Thinking about methods**

To be sure ‘going there’ was an attraction not only to verify what they had heard but to participate in the excitement of the moment (as elaborated in the following section). There was an interest to ‘tag along and maybe get involved’ (Justin), or to go there because it ‘was a nice day’ and ‘[t]here was people down there that I was meeting anyway’ (Anna). From their accounts, many of them walked over a two or three hour period from The Point in Central Milton Keynes through several housing estates to the centre of Bletchley. But importantly such gathering and travelling was an ethnographic method of cutting through the mediated accounts that accumulated:

**Jamie:** Were there any other rumours that you heard about places where you weren’t, that you then established whether it was true or not by some way?



- Leanne:** The Hub and then I walked past that because we went to pick someone up from College and then walked back through Oldbrook, and then walked down to the Hub to see if it was true and it weren't.
- Jamie:** So you went there as you were going anyway, or you went there to see if it was happening?
- Leanne:** Mmm...
- Abdul:** I witnessed it. I went to see it the next day. I went Bletchley.
- Suzie:** I was told by some of my friends because I live in Bletchley as well, and then when I went past on the bus next day and it was like the windows were covered with boards and I was like 'Oh, OK maybe it did happen'.
- Anna:** We was walking from here to Bletchley. We saw loads of people on the way back and they told us. And people were ringing me that were already there that we were supposed to be meeting in Bletchley init.
- Brett:** Basically I just like got in touch with all these and told them about it, and then just go down and see what's going on.
- Suzie:** With the Hub that I got told that it was on fire, that's why I phoned my sister, so like my sister confirmed like it wasn't true, and then when I got told about Blockbuster when I went passed on the bus next day the window was boarded up so in my mind I thought 'oh well it's true'.

In some ways how participants negotiated different methods of knowing echoes what Walker (2010) and others have described as a challenge of digital ethnography: how can we account for the 'interconnected and overlapping mediated contexts' that people typically negotiate? (26). We need a method of ethnographic inquiry that does not re-inscribe a division between online and offline worlds (Miller 2011) but that is able to follow the contingencies and vicissitudes of different ways of knowing. This calls for a 'mobile approach' that highlights the 'liveliness' and connectedness of various online and offline social practices.

Additionally, and arising from our investigation, the argument that the widespread use of mobile phones encourages people to withdraw from their immediate environment just does not hold (Turkle 2011, p. xii). Instead, young people are selective with their use of different media as methods of knowing and seek out 'close encounters' to verify knowledge and trust face-to-face networks and first hand observation most when it comes to things that matter.

What this discussion of the formations of communication and processes of 'knowing about' shows is the extent to which the young people in our pilot study both connected to each other and engaged in 'riot talk'. We suggest that this 'riot talk' can be understood as on-going exchanges about what was happening in their neighbourhoods of the city but also as a set of shared emotional, experiential and moral engagements with the events. It is to these that we now turn.

### **3. Thrill seeking, excitement and sociality**

In the aftermath of the responses to the riots of 2011 one of the widely circulated arguments was that young people were involved not only for reasons of criminality and deviancy but also out of boredom and for 'something to do. For example, the *Telegraph* (29<sup>th</sup> August 2011) reported the findings of study of 1000 young people with the headline 'Rioting teenagers were bored on a long summer holiday'. Similarly the post riot inquiry report prepared by the

National Centre for Social Research for the Cabinet Office (Morell et al 2011: 6) also argued that boredom - having 'nothing better to do' - had been a key contributory factor in the riots happening. In many ways this explanatory framework can be seen as part of a trope to depoliticise the riots, criminalise those that participated in them and emphasise the riots' lack of meaning (Murji and Neal 2011). But with this concern in mind, the extent to which riotous behaviour does contain elements of thrill seeking, sociality, joining in/group dynamics - the power of the extraordinary - does nevertheless need to be considered as part of a more rounded understanding of transgression and participation in urban disturbance.

This interest in the riots as allowing/creating a set of enacted social practices focussed on participants' thrill seeking and visceral enjoyment and group dynamics picks up on the interests of cultural criminologists such as Katz (1988); Ferrell et al (1999); Presdee (2000; 2004) and Hayward et al (2008) who have attempted to relate and understand crime in late modernity in terms of broader cultural and social environments in which they take place and/or are identified as crime. For cultural criminologists the focus is not in the socio-economic structural linking of crime and practices of crime per se rather they are interested in the everyday, in the vernacular, in popular culture, in emotions and experiences, mass media and image, in illicit behaviours and transgression as well as in the various mundane and extraordinary ways in which control is sought for these. In this way cultural criminology has been concerned with sub-cultures, folk devils, style and music genres, moral panics, the commodification of crime so it becomes offered/available as entertainment and as titillation. Cultural criminology is interested in the attractiveness of crime for its own sake rather than for any material aim - e.g. thrill and pleasure seeking and risk seeking criminal practices. In this way such practices as drug taking, graffiti, joy riding, vandalism have all been a focus for criminological analysis. Cultural criminology invites a move away from rational instrumentalism and structural and causal explanatory models and pushes at the boundaries as to what crime is and to the extent to which criminality and deviancy permeates collective, everyday worlds and mainstream cultures (see Neal 2009).

At a time of a strange (late modern) conjuncture in many societies in the global north between punitive and expanding criminal justice systems on the one hand and a mainstream enchantment with transgressive practice and commodified crime on the other it is clear that theoretical perspectives which ask such questions as what does crime mean, how do collective meanings of crime relate to the everyday and to mainstream cultures, who becomes associated with crime and menace and why; which criminal practices are appealing and exciting, how is crime controlled and who gets effected by such controls are very much needed.

It is in this context that the ways in which our focus group participants talked about hearing about and watching the riots through the various information sites-television, social media, word of mouth, parents, radio - and how they emotionally and socially responded that becomes significant. How did this information and the emotional impact of the riots make them *feel* individually and collectively and how did it make them *feel* about Milton Keynes as the place in which they lived - desires for disorder and a part in any such event or a reaction against it; a curiosity and a sense of fun and excitement or condemnation and anxiety? In many ways reading through the focus group transcripts it is possible to see traces and aspects of all of these responses colliding and bumping uneasily into each other as the participants' collective conversation.

For example, in this excerpt from the transcript some of the participants describe wanting to take part but also the fear of looking stupid and the fear of getting arrested and punished:

**Justin:** I did actually want to get involved but I didn't want to do it on my own because I would have looked like a spastic.

**Anna:** But if you could do it without getting caught...

**Justin:** Yeah if I could do it without getting caught I probably wouldn't be sitting here right now I'd be sitting somewhere else outside or something. If there was no such thing as justice then...

**Brett:** Then I think everyone would have got involved.

**Justin:** I think I'd actually be sitting here smoking a spiff and probably punching someone.

**Abdul:** I was thinking the people got 18 months...

**Justin:** Well done!

**Abdul:** it was stupid yeah. Nick [steal] an Armani top, wear it for a day and then you gotta give it back and get sent down.

It is possible to see the difference between Justin and Brett's thrill seeking and Abdul's condemnation and Anna's ambivalence as she moves between the two. There is more of this multiple positioning in the next excerpt. What is particularly striking is the shifts and instabilities in the participants' descriptions of what was happening and the emotional affect on them.

**Jamie:** Just in turn would you each mind telling me if you remember how you first heard about the riots that happened in London, just so like the first time you heard about them and what your first thought was when you heard about them?

**Suzie:** BBM, and I thought it was stupid to be honest.

**Jamie:** So when you heard through BBM was it a close friend?

**Suzie:** Yeah, it was on my friend's phone and they were showing me and I was like 'well 'why would you do it? Stupid!'

**Jamie:** This is London?

**Leanne:** I thought it was quite funny.

**Justin:** I heard it on the news,

**Brett:** I saw it on the news.

**Justin:** But really to be honest in Milton Keynes it wasn't really a riot was it? It's a bunch of people smashing a couple of windows, and a couple of car windows, that's not a riot that's just someone being a dick-head.

**Jamie:** So the first thing, the way that you heard about it was someone's BBM, and your (Suzie's) first thought was that it was stupid. And Justin?

**Justin:** On the news.

**Jamie:** The first thing you heard was the TV news?

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Jamie:** And your first thought was that this was going to be in Milton Keynes?

- Justin:** Yeah, I thought it was actually going to be a riot in Milton Keynes, not someone drunk and just...
- Anna:** Yeah, we could do that on one of our Friday nights.
- Jamie:** You expected more, you expected something to happen in Milton Keynes, and you expected something big to happen?
- Justin:** I didn't expect it really, I just thought because you've got so many people that think they're 'dons' they were actually going to do something, just not chuck a stone at a window.
- Anna:** Chuck a water melon through a window (laughter)...
- Justin:** They think that they're totally 'breezed' because they chucked a stone at a window and went in there and run back out again.
- Jamie:** Anna, what's the first time you heard about it?
- Anna:** On the news, my mum told me about it before I saw the news. My mates were talking about it and I just thought as soon as I heard 'how long is it going to be until we start'. I knew it weren't going to be as big as London obviously.

We have quoted at some length here but the extent to which contradictory positions and performances are taken up comes through in this section of the group's conversation. Certainly there is morality here. Leanne describes the riots as stupid and her and Justin agree on the pointlessness of destruction of where you live. But there are more visceral and enchanted/longing responses present too. Anna's almost wistful comment about when would it start even though she knows nothing in Milton Keynes could match the intensity of the events in London. Justin's contributions also have this same echo - that something would happen in Milton Keynes - not just people being drunk but something darker and more violent 'they were actually going to do something, not just chuck a stone'. The ways in which Milton Keynes as a place is identified - and dismissed as inconsequential - also comes to the fore in this set of discussions. Again it is Justin's rather dismissive description of the limits of the disturbance in the city compared to what was taking place in London which reflect a sort of disappointment - even disgust - at the provincial, small scale of the (albeit disorderly) act of smashing windows 'that's not a riot that's just someone being a dickhead'.

But this sense of disappointment is also held at bay and contained by a sense of powerlessness and compliance. Later in the conversation the discussion focuses on the limitations of disorder and an awareness of the impact of entering the criminal justice system on people's lives:

- Abdul:** I wasn't really fussed about it. If they want to burn the place let them burn it, I don't care as long as they don't burn my estate I'm cool with it.
- Jamie:** Where do you live, Woughton-on-the-Green?
- Abdul:** There's nothing to burn in Woughton-on-the-Green. Let Fishermead or whatever burn. As long as it don't reach here yeah and it don't affect people, then I'm cool. I never go to The Hub, you can burn your own place I just wasn't really that bothered to be honest. As long as it don't affect me I'm cool.
- Jamie:** Is that how everyone else thought or does anyone disagree, strongly agree, strongly disagree?

- Justin:** Well to be honest I thought if they want to take part in burning something...
- Anna:** If they want to smash their estate then let them.
- Justin:** What can you do? They are going to make their estate even trampier init.
- Suzie:** Mess their lives up.
- Justin:** Like now just think about all the people that's gone to prison. Now I'd love to see them get a job when they get out.
- Brett:** Which one of them had a job before they went in?
- Abdul:** That's if they get out, because once you're in there you're going to be like 'I'm a top dog'. You're not, you're going to get beaten up or beat someone up and then you're going to get more time, you're just going to become known in the prison, you're going to be like there's a life for you right here. I'm known by gangster people, whatever, so you get a reputation for prison and you stay there for your whole life because you think you're a top dog and you're not. If you think of it, you can't make no money. How are you meant to make money when you come out? You can't make no money so you just stay in there. You can't do nothing when you come out so you just stay in there and do it again.

What is apparent is that camaraderie, fun, transgressive acts and a desire to be part of something and have Milton Keynes be riotous was circulating through the groups' conversations. Some of this can be interpreted as a mix of the Bhaktinian thrill of the carnivalesque (Bhaktin 1965) and performativity – seen here for example Abdul's response to the question, 'what was your first thought when you heard about it on Facebook?'

- Abdul:** I just laughed. I knew it was going to happen sooner or later. I just didn't think it was going to be that soon.
- Jamie:** What makes you say that you knew it was going to happen sooner or later?
- Abdul:** Because it's like kids thinking they run the place. So... And they say...Can you swear?
- Jamie:** Are you asking me now?
- Abdul:** Yeah they say like 'Fuck feds' and stuff

What is striking is the extent to which the focus group members are able to move and reflect with some agility through the morality of the post-riot discussions and take up positions that are both thrill-seeking and condemnatory. The participants' moral ambivalences did not extend to their perspectives on the police and their articulations of their relationships with the police. As Murji and Neal (2011) have argued, unlike the urban unrest of the 1980s, the police were relatively absent as an explanatory focus of the riots in 2011. Yet much of the post riot inquiry has found that animosity and poor relations between young people and the police has been widely identified as a factor in the 2011 events (Guardian/LSE 2011). This is the theme we now take up in the following section.

#### **4. Policing disorder**

In many of the riots in England since the 1970s, the police have been a key party in events. This is not in the obvious sense that it is the police who are in the 'front line' of responding to crime and disorder, but a structural and routine issue about experiences of rough and unfair treatment by the police, particularly in stop and search practices. This well established theme in riots over many decades makes the police seem, or be seen as, one of the causes of violent disorder in the first place. Oppressive over-policing has been a factor, and sometimes the main or key factor, of riots in Notting Hill in the 1970s, Brixton and elsewhere in London and the UK in 1981 and Brixton and Broadwater Farm in 1985. The same issue or concern has been identified in riots in other countries, for example, the events of Los Angeles in 1992 or the Parisian suburbs in 2005. All of these events share another common logic. While each of them is complexly constituted, in each the issue of race and racial discrimination has been paramount. In London and other parts of Britain, this has mainly meant people of African-Caribbean origins, in the USA, African-Americans, and in France, young people of Arabic origins.

This link between race and riots has underlined explanations of disorder in terms of racism, police malpractice, social exclusion and economic disadvantage (Benyon and Solomos 1987, Keith 1993, Bagguley and Hussain 2009). In Britain it seems so deep seated that events which do not fit the race/policing template either get bracketed out of explanations in relation to the 2011 riots, or are not regarded as riots at all. The first point is evident in the ways in which 2011 events are largely not referenced in relation to the 2001 disturbances or riots in northern towns of England. Although these are associated predominantly with people of South Asian origins - and racism, ethnic conflict, cultural withdrawal and separation and economic disadvantage were all invoked as causes of those riots - 'race' seems not to provide the link between that and 2011. On the second point, other disturbances - largely associated with white people - sometimes are not called riots such as the outbreaks of disorder and violence in outlying large social housing estates in towns such as Oxford, Luton and Newcastle in the early 1990s, or the student demonstrations and disorder of 2010. Football related disorder tend not to be called riots, perhaps for the same reason.

Milton Keynes is culturally and ethnically diverse and we might have expected some race type reasoning to arise in our focus groups. They did, but only to a limited extent, though this could be to do with the framing of the questions. Or it may be the ways in which 'race matters' - such as the police shooting of Mark Duggan, a mixed race man - were located 'far away' in the imaginations of our respondents. Indeed one of them even got who shot whom wrong: 'I heard that someone had got shot in London by . . . I don't know who it was by but that's what started it off. I heard that some foreign person shot an English police officer and then that's what started it all off, but I don't know if it's true or not' (Leanne, foreign connoting black?). So race and racism were largely absent from our groups discussion of events in and around Milton Keynes.

Yet without being asked any direct questions about the police, there were inevitably many observations on policing. Resentment about and anger against low level day to day police harassment of communities - or of particular populations - is one of the key factors identified by the Guardian/LSE research on the riots as this headline of 5 December 2011 indicates: 'Rioters say anger with police fuelled summer unrest' (Lewis et al. 2011).

Milton Keynes is policed by Thames Valley police who have had reported problems with disorder in other areas that come under the control of the force. In terms of police-community relations the trope of police misuse of their powers, so well established in some other parts of the country. There is no reason to think that MK is particularly different from many areas where there are day-to-day 'run in's' between the police and particular groups, and there is some evidence of this in relation to young people on particular estates in MK (Mehigan

2009). For the reasons that it does not fit the template and that it is not marked by well-established police-community conflicts, MK provides an interesting set of parallels with established tropes about policing, as well as some departure from them. Without any encouragement to do so, our participants express visceral views of the police in general commentary:

**Brett:** What that police are [is] waste [useless]? Police are cockroaches man.

**Justin:** Police are hypocritical CUNTS!

**Anna:** It's true. It's like telling us to pick up our dog shit but they [police] don't pick up their horse shit!

These kinds of views arise in specific comments but they reflect a generalised lack of trust in the police and a sense that there is one rule for them and another for everyone else. However, the disdainful view of the police is tempered by a reaction against any rioters themselves. This comes in several parts, one is a criticism of rioting or disorder on their 'own turf', a second is a criticism of whether it is the police themselves who are, or should or should not be the target/object of the disorders, and a third is a combination of the first two, of whether damaging their own turf is a sufficient cause for an attack on the police at all.

**Justin:** It was kind of funny as well because people doing the riot, running around... It's their own estate, like, why would you do that? It's just gonna make it look trampier to like throw stones, and break windows in your own estate..... Why would you damage your own estate just to get back at the police officers. What's the point?

**Leanne:** Yeah, people making up rumours trying to scare everybody, but then I went down the stairs because I smoke, and all of a sudden there was just loads of police officers outside and everybody was like 'something here is going to kick off'. As soon as a big bunch of people just start walking up to the police van. Just like stupid!

At the same time, some of our respondents also felt that the scale of the police resources applied to the events they witnessed was excessive:

**Justin:** And as I was walking through the town like there was about 4 or 5 of us moving through the town in Bletchley then about 30 police officers 'where are you going? This is a crime scene'. I was like 'no its not! It's three smashed windows'

**Anna:** By the time we got there like 3.30pm-4.00pm there was no-one there, just police saying 'this is a crime scene' for a smashed water melon!' (laughs)

As the riots of 2011 spread across several days and around England, there was a marked increase in police resources to get a 'grip' on any disorder. The relationship between resources and risks, or between numbers and actual disorder was felt to be grossly out of order as the remarks about a stolen and smashed watermelon indicate. These also led our group to question whether the local events added up to a 'riot' at all. Yet despite their interest in witnessing some of the events, for which they travelled some distance on foot, it should be recalled, for at least two of them there were good reasons to stay away.

**Justin:** My mum said there's riots going on in Bletchley so if you're not getting involved come home, and if you get arrested then don't expect me to come to the Police Station. Every time I get arrested she always comes, she's whipped. Last time I got arrested she was drunk and she come and was

like 'give me your hand' (then he demonstrates how she half-heartedly slapped him on the hand). But I didn't do anything wrong, honest.

**Suzie:** No, it's just better to stay away because that way if you go down there and the Police turn up then they're going to think that you're doing something, like you've got involved, and then you're going to get nicked, and then you think 'well, why am I getting nicked for it I haven't done anything', so I avoided Bletchley Town and just went home.

We made a judgment to not ask our group if they had actually taken part in the riots, apart from observing events. In research for the Cabinet office a NatCen report (Morrell et al 2011) draws lines between 'watchers', 'rioters', 'looters' and the 'non-involved'. While our data is not detailed or extensive enough to make such distinctions, there is also something artificial about these categories, which are undoubtedly more fluid in public order/disorder situations. More usefully, that report also points to factors that facilitated or inhibited involvement in the riots. Feeling 'bored', a sense that other people were getting 'free stuff' and 'tugs' from peers all contributed to being involved or watching, while the presence of adults was an inhibiting factor to some degree. We can see this as Justin's mum attempts to restrain him by telephone, though in Suzie's case there is a plainer instrumental calculation that the risk of arrest outweighs any possible benefits. Both the Guardian/LSE and NatCen work found that many rioters or at least those who were caught and charged had criminal records. In our group it was evident that Justin was on probation because he declared it himself. As one of the most voluble members of the group his account suggests that constraints (his mum) and peer pressure (his friends) pull and push him to and away from the events.

Our two focus groups confirm a key theme in the most extensive research on the riots of 2011, that resentment against the police was one of the factors that rioters draw attention in accounting for the scale of their reaction. However, underneath that, our small and local focus group suggest that resentment is not a sufficient driver in itself, even though the level of the police reaction is considered to be excessive. There are mixed views about rioters destroying their 'own turf' as a complaint against policing. And inhibition/disinhibition for getting involved in the events relies on a variety of factors.

## **5. Conclusions**

Our discussions are based on a small pilot study and as such any findings and claims that we have made have to be viewed in that context. However, while acknowledging these limitations given the scale of our empirical inquiry, we would suggest that our findings resonate and share commonality with those of other post riot inquiries. These studies have also all shown that communication techniques, sociality and peer group relations and poor relations between police and young people did seem to be contributory factors in the 2011 riots. However, while the shared nature of our findings is significant, our study is also novel in two ways. First, it uses these frames to reflect on the ways in which communication techniques, intra group social relations and youth-police relations were experienced in a city where riots did not take place. In other words, even when all these factors, which have been widely identified as key to the disturbances, were present 'nothing' of note happened. Again this would seem to emphasise the importance of the context and place specific nature of the riots in 2011. The riots and those involved in them seemed to share features, stories, motivations and grievances but the riots were profoundly shaped by locality and the nature of specific places themselves.

The second novel aspect of our study is the way in which our methods produced a collective conversation between a gender and ethnically diverse group of young people which was surprisingly open and animated as well as emotionally intense. The lack of reservation and



reticence within the group's contributions is significant and is reflected in the almost ethnographic quality of their accounts of how they knew, felt and experienced not only the riots in 2011 but also their lives in Milton Keynes. It was in this way that we were able to glimpse not only how they knew about, felt about and made sense of the riots but we were also afforded insight into their collective thinking, senses of responsibility and ambivalent but often intensely moral reasoning about violence and disorder.

## **Appendix 1: Background on Interviews and Focus Groups**

The interviews and focus groups were organised by all of us and conducted by Jamie Kesten.

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted, the first with ‘Helen’ a senior member of the Milton Keynes Council Youth Services team. She helped to secure support for the project from the Council and also helped to identify the most appropriate site and secondary point of contact at an area based level within a specific youth centre. The second, with ‘Alistair’ who was recommended by Helen due to his position running a youth centre located in Central Milton Keynes (which was described in the local press as the site of large gatherings of young people on the day of the riots), enabled us to identify specific young people to participate in the research on the basis of their knowledge of and communication around the rioting in Milton Keynes.

The first focus group on the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2012 focused on asking the young people what technologies they used to confirm what was or was not happening during the period of the riots, whether (and if so how) they used and interpreted the different kinds of data that they accessed (such as radio, phone calls, texts, BBM, twitter, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube etc.), which were most important, how the various technologies and data differently informed their understandings of the riots in Milton Keynes (MK) and their views on the role of various technologies during the riots.

The second focus group on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2012 used four main forms of visual data and methods to explore the responses from the first focus group. Firstly, it used a mapping exercise to engage participants in a visualisation of their activities where they were asked to draw the route they took on the day of the riots – noting start and end points and times and places they witnessed large crowds of people, ‘rioting’ or disorder – and then discuss these movements and the reasons behind them with the group. Secondly, it used Police crime maps for the local area and national media maps for England to explore participants’ thoughts on what such maps tell us about the riots, particularly given the fact that there was little noticeable difference to (what were already relatively low) normal crime rates during the period of the riots, as well as to engage them in a discussion of how ‘knowing the riots’ involved walking to the locations where it was understood riots were or might be taking place. Thirdly, it used local media and police accounts and images of the riots in MK via YouTube and online local newspaper stories to gauge reaction from the young people on media representations of what took place and to discover how these representations related to their own experiences and understandings as well as to explore the place of rumour in the media and in the messages young people received about the riots directly via text, phone calls, BBM and in person from friends and family. Finally, it used the Guardian interactive timeline of riot ‘tweets’ to prompt further discussion on the use and role of digital devices and social media in the spread of knowledge and rumours around the riots, including specific questions around issues of privacy relating to social media and its use in prosecuting offenders since the riots.

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