

**The evolving normative dimensions of “riot”:  
toward an elaborated social identity explanation**

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This research was funded by a grant to John Drury, Clifford Stott and Steve Reicher from the Economic and Social Research Council, grant number ES/N01068X/1. We would like to thank Tim Newburn for access to the Guardian/LSE “Reading the Riots” interview dataset, and Richard Grove for graphic design of the figures. All base maps are © OpenStreetMap contributors. The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Word Count [10,168]

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**Abstract**

The question of how normative form changes during a riot, and thus how collective behaviour spreads to different targets and locations, has been neglected in previous research, despite its theoretical and practical importance. We begin to address this limitation through a detailed analysis of the rioting in the London borough of Haringey in 2011. A triangulated analysis of multiple sources of data (including police reports, media accounts, and videos) finds a pattern of behaviour shifting from collective attacks on police targets to looting. A thematic analysis of 41 interview accounts with participants gathered shortly after the events suggests that a shared anti-police identity allowed local postcode rivalries to be overcome, forming the basis of empowered action not only against the police but to address more long-standing grievances and desires. It is argued that collective psychological empowerment operated in a “positive feedback loop”, whereby one form of collective self-objectification (and perceived inability of police to respond) formed the basis of further action. This analysis of the development of new targets in an empowered crowd both confirms and extends the elaborated social identity model as an explanation for conflictual intergroup dynamics.

Key words: crowds, social identity, empowerment, collective conflict, 2011 English riots.

## Introduction

The “riots” that took place across several English cities in August 2011 displayed two significant features. First, there was their geographical spread, initially across London and then to other cities in the Midlands and the North West. Second, the riots were marked by behavioural change, from anti-police riots to a prevalence of looting and attacks on “wealth”. Both features present explanatory challenges. To begin to address these, this paper presents an analysis of the evolving social psychological dynamics of the first of the riots that took place across the London borough of Haringey in August 2011, which began as an attack upon police but developed into widespread looting in nearby shopping centres. Using an extensive corpus of primary and secondary sources, we first reconstruct the events and then use participant interviews to analyse the social psychological processes underlying them.

### Explaining the 2011 English riots

The English riots of 2011 were a series of conflicts characterized by both commonality – hundreds of people acting collectively – and change – a shift from anti-police activity to looting and property damage, both within and across events (Lewis et al., 2011; Metropolitan Police Service, 2012). Yet an explanation that captures both of these features is still lacking. Instead, the dominant theoretical explanations that have emerged in the research literature have tended to focus on either one or the other. Thus, one form of explanation focuses on the looting, which it explains as a matter of individuals acting out their neoliberal consumerist identity (e.g., Winlow, Hall, Treadwell & Briggs, 2015; Moxon, 2011; Treadwell, Briggs, Winlow, & Hall, 2013). From this perspective, the 2011 riots were a nihilistic explosion of frustrations among those denied access to the economic and social benefits of capitalism. The assumption is that impoverished rioters unanimously acted on consumerist ideology (e.g., the value of branded trainers) but had no awareness of, or capability to understand, the class structures that led to their frustrations. As such, the riots “*contained no core political message for us to decode*” (Winlow, et al., p. 140) other than they reveal the “*ultimate intellectual and political exhaustion of the academic Liberal Left*” (ibid; p. 142).

The second perspective tends to focus on attacks on police and property, understanding them in terms of structurally-driven political protest (e.g., Akram, 2014; Moran & Waddington, 2015). In this account, the spread of the riots can be understood as a direct expression of grievances among the rioters about the illegitimacy of their surrounding social structural conditions (e.g., police racism).

To date, over 130 peer-reviewed journal articles and more than 15 books have been written on the events of 2011. Yet only a minority of these are empirical. The largest and most extensive research study of the 2011 riots is the *Guardian*/LSE's "Reading the Riots", based on 270 interviews with rioters carried out soon after the events (Lewis et al., 2011; see Newburn, 2016a, 2016b; Newburn, Lewis, Addley, & Taylor, 2011; Newburn, Diski et al., 2016). This work has provided a rich analysis of the experiences of rioters, showing that, together with collective anger, empowerment and joy were evident in actions such as defeating the police (Newburn, Deacon et al., 2016). Theoretically, "Reading the Riots" researchers have sought to provide a general criminological analysis of cause and consequences in the 2011 English riots; in effect, they offer a "grand theory" of riot (e.g., Winlow et al., 2014; Newburn, 2017) rather than an account of the specific *social psychological* dynamics underpinning normative change and spread.

Other studies that have drawn upon detailed primary empirical evidence have also yet to explore how collective behaviour within the riots *changed* from anti-police conflict into looting (e.g., Jeffery & Jackson, 2012). Moreover, those studies drawing upon substantive quantitative datasets (such as police arrest and crime figures) do describe shifting patterns in the riots across time and location (Baudains, Braithwaite, & Johnson, 2012), but lack an underlying social psychological explanation for how these kinds of normative shifts and changes came about.

## **The Social Psychology of Riots**

The elaborated social identity model of crowd behaviour (ESIM; Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2009; Reicher, 1996, 2001; Stott & Reicher, 1998a) has sought to address a key explanatory problem of riots, which is that of how to make sense of both patterns of collective behaviour and changes in those patterns. The ESIM has built on Reicher's (1984) analysis of the limits of crowd behaviour, while at the same time seeking to avoid both irrationalism (e.g., Le Bon, 1895/2002; Zimbardo, 1970) and narrow rationalism (e.g., Berk, 1974; Olson, 1965) in its explanation of patterns and change. The model proposes that shared self-categorisation is the psychological basis of the norms evident in crowd-based collective action; shared self-categorisation provides definitions of appropriate and possible conduct, and so enables crowd participants to act collectively as well as defining limits. Given that social identities are intimately linked to their social context (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994), changes in relations between groups (e.g., protestors and police) that take place during a crowd event can radically alter identities. Based on a body of research on the emergence and escalation of collective conflict (e.g., Reicher, 1996; Stott & Drury, 2000; Stott, Hutchison, & Drury, 2001; Stott, Adang, Livingstone, & Schreiber, 2007, 2008; Stott & Reicher, 1998a, 1998b), the ESIM suggests that psychological and behavioural change in riots is primarily a matter of social repositioning and consequent collective empowerment as group boundaries are re-drawn and expectations of support increase (Drury & Reicher, 1999). Such expectations enable the crowd to realise (or "objectify") its identity, which in practice means imposing itself on the outgroup; this objectification in turn empowers the crowd further, as it operates as evidence of the tractability of opponents and of collective ability to effect "resistance" (Drury & Reicher, 2005).

### **Applying the ESIM to normative change**

While the ESIM was developed to explain normative change in crowd events, it has not yet addressed some of the kinds of change apparent in the 2011 English riots. First, early work

concerned *initial* emergence of “riot” behaviour from peaceful protest, and the implications for policing (e.g., Stott, 2011). The ESIM has been applied to an analysis of the emergence of rioting in Tottenham in August 2011 (Stott, Drury, & Reicher, 2017), but that analysis was limited to the dynamics of the initial escalations. As such it left the issue of ongoing normative change toward looting unaddressed. Second, **previous ESIM** research on changed aims and empowerment has examined the creation of new identities and how these made possible new collective actions against outgroups (Drury & Reicher, 1999, 2000, 2005), but has not examined how those with existing anti-police identities change over time, and thus how looting and property damage becomes normative.

Nevertheless, the ESIM can be used as a theoretical framework to derive hypotheses. Specifically, the theory would suggest that normative change from police to other targets would be a function of variations in intergroup power, and that choice of, and attacks on, new targets are shaped and constrained by shared social identity and hence by collective definitions of legitimacy.

For example, in a study of the 1990 “poll tax riot” (Stott & Drury, 2000) it was evident that participants’ empowerment enabled them to address an immediate proximal concern, namely retaliation against “illegitimate” police action; in other words, police intervention created the conditions for “reactive rioting”. **What still requires examination, however, is “proactive rioting”, meaning** extending the action to attacks on other targets that seem to relate to longer-term grievances (e.g., subsequent attacks on shops in the West End of London appear to be attacks on wealth inequality, an attack on the South African Embassy an expression of political antagonism toward apartheid).

### **The present study**

In this paper, we report a study designed to begin to address this question of normative change within riots by using an analysis of the first of the 2011 disturbances that took place in Haringey

in north London on the evening of the 6th and morning of the 7th August (see Figure 1). We have chosen this riot for several reasons. First, there is the social significance - this was the first of what became the biggest wave of urban riots in the UK for 30 years; it was the catalyst from which the other riots subsequently developed across the next four days (Lewis et al., 2011). Second, this event exhibited clear prima facie evidence of normative change as well as escalation (Reicher & Stott, 2011; Stott et al., 2017). The event developed from a peaceful protest outside Tottenham police station to violent conflict between crowd and police to widespread looting in two shopping centres located some distance away. Third, the present study has been made possible because of the quantity and quality of data we have available, including 41 interview accounts obtained from a large sample of people directly involved, and an extensive corpus of secondary sources.

---Insert Figure 1 about here---

The interviews were obtained as part of the “Reading the Riots” study in the months immediately following the disturbances (Lewis et al., 2011). This data was supplemented by a body of additional evidence we have used to build a triangulated account of the Haringey riot across time and geographical location. We use this data to provide an objective account of the nature of the riot and then cross-reference chronology with the interview transcripts to document and analyse participants’ shared definitions of self and other as they developed. On this basis, we examine the subjective accounts of participants with interest in references to identity, intergroup relationships, power and empowerment, and relate these to ongoing social relations, targets, and patterns of participation. In summary, therefore, our overall aim in this study was to explain how looting and attacks on property emerged from an anti-police riot, and how these became collective. As part of this, we sought to provide the first highly detailed account of the events in question.

## Methods

The analysis is in two parts, each employing different methods and drawing on a range of sources.

### **Triangulated Account**

The triangulated account provides a consensual description of the broad parameters and salient features of the disturbances in the London borough of Haringey over the night of 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> August 2011 that are relevant to the subsequent analysis. The methodological approach used to generate this account is that of triangulation (cf. Denzin, 1970) to substantiate the veracity of the timing, location and content of an incident within an event. There are three types of information that make up the triangle: evidence of the actions of the crowd, real-time media recorded *during* the events and *post hoc* accounts by participants and eyewitnesses. Through cross-referencing these forms of evidence and making reasoned assessments of the quantity and quality of the sources, a level of confidence can be determined that an incident occurred and when and where it happened.

Using this approach, a timeline of events for the disturbances was created and from this, a comprehensive **narrative** account was written. An initial timeline was constructed from existing post-event accounts (Metropolitan Police Service [MPS], 2012; Reicher & Stott, 2011; Stott et al., 2017) and then populated and cross-referenced with ~200 items of evidence. These included government and independent reports, academic publications, and written accounts in local and national media. Sixty online videos, along with numerous photographic sources, were cross-referenced using Google Street View and other sources to determine locations and timings. Timelines and real-time reporting on blogs created during and after the unrest, and contemporaneous Twitter messages, provided additional temporal and spatial evidence. These sources were cross-referenced with comprehensive data on sites, times and types of crimes related to the disorders in Haringey provided by the MPS. Most participant testimonies came from 41 interviews collected as part of the *Guardian*/LSE Reading the Riots project. Other

eyewitness accounts, including those of police officers, were found in official reports, newspapers, and the academic literature. A full list of sources is provided in the Supporting Information.

### **Psychological Account**

The interviews were undertaken by researchers recruited by the *Guardian*/LSE and completed within three months of the riots (Lewis et al., 2011). Each researcher utilised existing local contacts to trace people who had been involved in the riots, the clear majority of whom had not at that point been arrested. Of all those interviewed by the “Reading the Riots study”, 30% were recorded as aged 10-17 and a further 49% aged 18-24. In relation to other demographic characteristics the sample closely matched the data reported by the Ministry of Justice for those appearing in court for riot-related offences. Thus, where ethnicity was recorded approximately 37% were white, 40% were black and 6% Asian; roughly 20% were female; around, 59% of rioters came from the most deprived 20% of areas in the UK with 68% of the interviewees admitting to having a prior conviction<sup>3</sup>. Interviews were conducted in various locations, such as people's own homes, youth clubs, cafes, and fast-food restaurants. They were semi-structured; each researcher was asked to find out how people first heard about the riots, how they became involved, how they communicated, what they did, why they thought the riots stopped, and how they felt about their actions now. Each interview lasted on average approximately 45 minutes.

The transcripts were all redacted to remove identifying information and then coded based on the geographical and temporal events that the individual reported being involved in. Of the full dataset (210 transcripts), 41 were found to be with people involved in the rioting or looting that took place variously on Tottenham High Road (n = 39), Tottenham Hale (n = 13) and Wood Green (n = 8) in Haringey. A random sample of 10 of these transcripts were then read by the first author and a preliminary theoretically-driven thematic analysis conducted (based on principles outlined in Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial sample of three transcripts based on a judgement concerning their theoretical relevance were passed to the rest of the team, and then

read in depth and coded by four of these researchers independently of one another. The research team then convened, discussed and refined the initial themes. The first author then read all 41 transcripts and analysed these in terms of all points of interest in relation to the research question: specifically, could we observe evidence of processes that help explain the spread and normative change?

The **psychological** analysis drew upon the **triangulated** account to provide a chronological ordering. This was achieved by organising statements within each transcript relevant to key moments in the ongoing evolution of the events. The analysis sought to identify evidence within the post-hoc accounts of processes that may have been operating during these key moments. At certain times and locations only a few of our participants were present. As such, we have assumed that where a theme is present in our sample it is evidence that a form of social psychology may have been at work at the time among sections of the crowd. Nonetheless we have also looked for disconfirming cases (Potter, 1996; e.g., instances where participants spoke of a lack of identity in the crowd, a lack of empowerment, differences within the crowd over normative conduct, or cite idiosyncratic explanations for their behaviour). Finally, the themes were used to revisit the transcripts and where relevant to quantify the extent to which they were present across the sample. An inter-rater reliability test carried out with 10% of the material suggested that the coding was consistent, Cohen's  $\kappa = .76$ .

### **Triangulated Account**

What follows is a summary of the disturbances in Haringey on 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> August 2011. The fully referenced, comprehensive account is provided in the Supporting Information. The death of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old Black male resident of Haringey, through the actions of an MPS firearms team on Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> August, 2011 in Tottenham Hale (Independent Police Complaints Commission [IPCC], 2015a), and the events that occurred over the two days after Mr Duggan's death, have been well-documented (IPCC, 2015b; MPS, 2012). The following account

concentrates on the chain of incidents that occurred *after* the decision was made to stage a protest at Tottenham Police station in the late afternoon of Saturday 6<sup>th</sup>.

### **The emergence of conflict**

Most accounts suggest that the point at which the protest outside Tottenham police station began to escalate into disorder coincided with the end of negotiations between protestors and police at around 20:30. In fact, more than an hour earlier, at around 19:00, two police cars parked nearby on Forster Road (Location 3, Figure 2) were vandalised and a resident journalist filming the scene was subsequently assaulted. However, barring a couple of missiles launched at the police station over the next hour (19:15-20:15) the situation remained tense but generally free from collective violence, the first of several lulls during the disturbance.

---Insert Figure 2 about here---

At approximately 20:20, the Duggan family group aborted their negotiations with the police and left the scene. Almost immediately, one of the vandalised police cars was pushed into the centre of the High Road and set alight. The second car followed a short time after. These actions and the throwing of missiles led the MPS to deploy a Territorial Support Group<sup>1</sup> (TSG) unit in full public order equipment outside the police station to create a “sterile area”. This provided defence for the police station and split the gathering crowd on the High Road into two groups, the larger to the north and another smaller group to the south. Even though missiles were sporadically launched at the cordon, this period (20:30-21:10) was effectively a second lull as the police, awaiting public-order trained reinforcements, lacked the numbers to respond, and crowd participants appeared reluctant to engage directly.

At 21:10, a second TSG unit arrived, deploying alongside their colleagues at the cordon to the north of the police station. Although instructed to “hold the line”, the inspector in charge of the second unit took a more aggressive approach, ordering short shield advances to “distance the attackers who were throwing missiles at police and to prevent them from ‘settling’ in their positions” (MPS, 2011 p. 43). It was during this period of rapid advances and retreats by the

TSG units, after dusk at around 21:30, that police knocked to the ground a young woman who approached the cordon. Following this incident there was a rapid escalation of collective violence. Angrily citing the “beating of the girl”, a body of protesters advanced down the High Road past the burning police vehicles and charged at the police cordon, launching a volley of missiles.

### **The emergence of arson and looting**

For the next hour on the High Road to the north of the police station, participants took bottles and broke up pallets from the front of shops to throw at the police cordon. Others wheeled refuse bins towards the police lines and made rudimentary firebombs. Whilst most were spectating or fighting the police, small groups of youths attempted to rob a nearby takeaway shop and an amusement arcade. Members of the crowd intervened and then encouraged other businesses to close. The volume and ferocity of the missile attacks on the two TSG units led them to cease making short shield advances. At 22:10 they withdrew towards the police station forming a single line cordon, holding their position and awaiting reinforcements.

Thirty minutes later, around 22:40, the first building was set alight, a solicitors’ office (Location 5, Figure 2) 50m north of the now smouldering police cars. At about the same time, 100m further north at the High Road-Brook Road junction (Location 6, Figure 2) a double-decker bus was commandeered and set on fire – images of the rapidly burning bus were broadcast live by several TV news crews that were now near the police station.

Around 23:15 in Bruce Grove – beyond the burning bus and out of direct line of site of the police station – several groups began looting shops. These included a supermarket, bookmakers, jewellers, and a post office, with the latter two targets set on fire shortly after. Two nearby banks had their windows smashed and there was also an attempt to burn one of these properties (Location 7, Figure 2).

It wasn’t until 23:30, more than three hours after the outbreak of serious violence, that enough public order trained reinforcements and mounted officers were gathered at Tottenham

police station to allow the police to go on the offensive by trying to disperse the crowd. For the next six hours, these reinforcements fought a series of staggered pitched battles at burning barricades for more than a mile north along the High Road towards White Hart Lane. The violence was almost exclusively directed at the police. There was significant looting of businesses, but a large proportion of this was undertaken to acquire material for barricades and missiles. Also, during the same period, a neighbourhood police station, supermarket, building site, local council offices, carpet store, jobcentre and recruitment office were selected for arson out of numerous potential targets.<sup>2</sup> The violence was eventually curtailed by a combination of the aggressive use of police helicopters and armoured vehicles, exhaustion and depletion of the rioters, and the approach of daylight. Although the battles on the High Road north of Tottenham police station continued until dawn, several rioters disengaged and travelled to other locations to take part in looting.

### **Tottenham Hale**

From about 23:30, members of the crowd south of the cordon on the High Road began to attack police carriers that were arriving at Tottenham police station. This action escalated over the next two hours, until at about 01:30 an abandoned police car parked at the junction of the High Road and Monument Way (Location 14, Figure 2) was wrecked and set alight. Journalists from Sky and the BBC who had been mingling amongst the crowd outside the police cordon for several hours were assaulted and their satellite van was attacked with missiles and forced to drive off.

A large part of this crowd then moved off along Monument Way heading towards Tottenham Hale Retail Park, less than half a mile away to the east (Location 16, Figure 2). By 02:00 several hundred people were looting several large shops in the complex with apparent impunity. Messages describing the uncontested looting in the retail park passed via Blackberry Messenger (BBM) into the social media arena attracting more people, some of whom began arriving in vehicles. For around four hours, hundreds of people took clothes, shoes, and

electronic goods from major chain stores. It wasn't until dawn that the first police units began to arrive in the retail park, chasing and arresting the few remaining looters who were scouring the ransacked shops.

### **Wood Green**

By 02:00 many to the north of the police station were gathered at the junction of Lordship Lane and Lansdowne Road (Location 15, Figure 2) and were becoming aware through BBM that Tottenham Hale retail park was being looted by hundreds of people without resistance. The direct route to Wood Green shopping centre, a mile and a half to the west, was via Lordship Lane, presenting a straightforward choice; continue fighting the police on the High Road or head to Wood Green. Around 03:00 this decision was effectively made for the remaining rioters by the actions of police when mounted and foot units seized the junction. The crowd was split into two groups by the police advance, one withdrawing west along Lordship Lane towards Wood Green, and the other retreating north along the High Road to continue the fight.

The disturbance in Wood Green occurred in two phases. The first, which began around midnight,<sup>3</sup> was registered by the MPS, but due to the urgent need to deploy all available police resources to the High Road, these reports were all but ignored. Dissemination by mobile phone of text descriptions and crucially images, proving the veracity of the first phase in Wood Green, helped generate a much more significant period of looting. Beginning at around 03:00 and lasting for more than six hours, the second phase was marked by apparently calm, systematic and often organised theft by hundreds of people of major stores on the High Road (Location 26, Figure 3). The targets of the looters were major retail chains ranging from those selling sportswear, mobile phones, and electronic goods to beauty products, health foods, and computer games. The arrival of the first police units at dawn led to several arrests, though sporadic looting continued for several hours until approximately 09:45 in the morning.

---Insert Figure 3 about here---

## Analysis of interview data

The triangulated account suggests the following issues require explanation. First, what was the relationship (if any) between initial crowd activities and shared identity in the crowd? Within this, how did people define themselves and their intergroup context in relation to the events? Second, psychologically, how did conflict become seen as legitimate and possible? Third, how did participants experience the developing conflict with police? To what extent was the experience one of empowerment? **Fourth and finally, building on these issues, how did looting come to be understood as appropriate and possible in this context of what was initially an anti-police riot and to what extent did the looting reflect individualistic motivations versus collective understandings of appropriate conduct?** The following thematic analysis orients to these questions. Extracts presented below were chosen for their efficiency of expression and representativeness of other quotes and themes within the dataset.

### Approaching the protest: “us” and “them”.

While all participants describe being aware of the shooting of Mark Duggan, some articulate its significance emerging because he was known to them and not seen as a legitimate target:

[At first] I didn't think nothing of it, just another guy, but when I found out who it was, cos I know 'im innit. 'Cos his family's, one of them big guys, so obviously, I knew he wasn't doing nothing wrong, he was coming back from party or something like that. (LON2710114309:7-10)<sup>4</sup>

Some 27 people (66%) in our sample described an intergroup context prior to the shooting whereby they or others like them were habitually subjected to illegitimate police stop and search<sup>5</sup>, leading to a sense of resentment and antagonism:

Q: How do you think people had got to that point of not caring?

A: Sometimes...<sup>6</sup> you know when something happens to you over and over again, like say I get arrested yeah, over and over again, and I get stopped and searched over and over again, and the police like keep trying to pick

on me over and over again say cos I'm black, and I'm young... you just get to a point where you're fed up and can't take it no more... (LON2110110827:302-306)

Thus, participants suggest that what had happened to Mark Duggan was emblematic of a wider collective relationship between the community and the police:

A: I didn't know him, but people I know did. So therefore, he's my bredren [brother]. It's just the way he died... sort of weird. If you have the balls to do it, do it then explain to his friends, you can't just say one thing and then another... so I just thought, "you know what? Look what they're doing to me, look what they did to him." (LON2210110829:239 - 242)

Thus, 32 interviewees (78%) described the shooting as a contributing factor to their involvement and that of others. The shooting appeared to operate as a way of defining identity in terms of a historical continuation of illegitimate, sometimes fatal, encounters with police. Other specific incidents referred to by participants were the shooting of Brazilian national Jean Charles de Menezes in 2005 and the Black British reggae singer Smiley Culture who had died during a police raid approximately five months prior to the riot:

'Cos look, look. Even the other day that Smiley Culture died in Brixton. They [police] trying to say he stabbed himself in the chest while he was cuffed. How's stuff like that happening? And they just keep getting away with it. They are just getting away with it. (LON1010111501:419 – 422)

Nonetheless, 25 respondents (61%) also pointed to other structural grievances such as economic inequality and denial of employment opportunities brought about primarily by the legislative actions of the then coalition government (e.g., raised university tuition fees and the scrapping of educational benefits for young people) as reasons for their participation.

### **Escalation: norms and limits.**

Ten participants (24%) were present at the protest. Another 20 (49%) joined the crowd on the High Road after collective confrontation had developed. Those that were present portray “bystanders” explicitly supporting confrontation against police targets:

And, um, all the crowds around were really supporting them. And were there, not only to, observe, but they were supporting them, actively supporting them in some way. [ ]<sup>7</sup> Like, I saw people going to pick up bricks that had fallen and passing them back. Um, so the people were involved at all sorts of levels... in my experience. (LON0111110701:105-109)

Moreover, 26 participants (63%) described attacks on police targets in a positive manner, with many claiming it as a collective reaction to their historical antagonisms with the police, defining a sense of “us” among people in the borough and none described these attacks in a negative way:

A: I wasn't really shocked, but then again.

Q: Why weren't you shocked?

A: Cos it's Tottenham like, it's just, it's bound to happen someday, it was bound to happen where the feds [police] were like, piss us off to the max where we just have to take it into our own hands and they couldn't do nuttin [nothing] about it so I just knew summat [something] like this would happen one day, I just didn't know when, but it didn't really shock me. (LON2710114309:107-113)

For some time in the face of these sporadic attacks, the approximately 55 officers outside the station did little else other than hold the small area of roadway, while they waited for reinforcements. In relation to this phase of the escalation, 25 participants (61%) described their surprise that police were not being more assertive in the face of obvious criminality:

They were all, they were just doing nothing. They were all standing outside the police station all lined up along the street and they weren't doing nothing whatsoever. They were just standing there. Even though the two cars, they'd already been fucked, the police still didn't do nothing (LON0410111301:183-186)

The targets of collective confrontation during these early stages included an arson attack against a bus and some looting of shops. The attack on the bus is important, in that it signals the first normative shift toward non-police targets by rioters; 19 participants (46%) were explicit that they disagreed with these kinds of attacks. Some described them as relatively meaningless:

A: I saw that, and they put a bus on fire I think, bare [lots of] things on fire

Q: And what did, what did they say to you when they set it on fire?

A: Well obviously I didn't wanna get involved in that sorta ting [thing], I'm not gonna get arrested for stupid things, so I wasn't really paying attention to it... There's no real sense of why they did it, they just did it. (LON2710114309:48-58)

Other participants also described limits to such behaviour, even for those actions some saw as anti-normative. For example, one participant describes how the arsonists actively sought to minimise the impact of their attack on members of the public:

My friend was on the bus as well. He was saying how the guys who did it come on the bus first to warn everyone to come off the bus, we're setting the bus on fire. I think that's good because at least they warned the people there first (LON0610111001:425-427)

Others describe how they actively tried to prevent attacks on private property:

Them things, I played no part in at all. I didn't respect that, when they're burning down people's shops and houses and that. That's where people

live. They ain't done nothing to man so I didn't rate that. And I made sure people around me that was lighting them. If you lot light them things I'm not no arson t'ing [thing] man. I'm not no arsonist. I'm not burning down houses for no reason (LON1010111501:296–301)

### **Convergence, shared identity and empowerment**

At around 22.40, as police reinforcements began to force rioters on the High Road north, participants from further afield – areas to the north such as Edmonton, Hackney and Wood Green – describe how they began to converge into the area, many through the railway station at Bruce Grove. Some arriving at this stage would not normally venture onto the High Road because of intense **intergroup antagonism between youths from different neighbourhoods, often referred to as postcode rivalries**. It is also evident that many had also not previously experienced a riot, and as such the situation was highly novel. Fifteen accounts (37%) describe an experience which was initially one of vulnerability - not from the police, but from the others within the crowd:

Well from the police car going on fire to the point where buses on fire and building on fire, I'm sort of thinking, it's not even safe to be outside, because anyone can do anything to you. A couple of people got stabbed that night, I think, a couple of people got stabbed... anything could happen, cos if they were putting buildings on fire and the police ain't doing nothing, then anyone could of stole, stabbed someone, killed someone and the police don't care. (LON2710114309:147-151)

Nonetheless, the shared antagonism toward the police appears to have allowed a sense of collective identity to be recognised that served to supersede these prior hostilities. This sense of common identity was described not merely as a reaction to police action in the proximal context

of the crowd, but as a consequence of their shared historical day-to-day experiences of illegitimate policing:

Q. Did you see people that you knew there?

A. Yeah. Some people that I didn't really speak to – 'cause we're on opposite postcodes. But it didn't really matter.

Q. Why did it not matter?

A. Coz it's the lesser of two evils.

Q. What do you mean?

A. The police are the biggest crime ever. It doesn't matter where you're from anymore. So, who's the greater evil? Your enemy's enemy? Your friends. (LON1510114302:87-99)

Just over half (54%) of our sample of 41 participants describe an emergent and collective experience within the crowd of comradery, friendly interaction, sharing and solidarity in place of the prior antagonisms:

Half the people who did the riots weren't even from our area. They come to help us. I mean if it was a gang wise, why are people from like Hackney coming down to Tottenham to help us? If it was to do with gangs wouldn't we be trying to hurt them? They'd be trying to hurt us. It wasn't like that. They all come down to Tottenham to try to help us.

(LON0610111001:531–535)

This emergent identity appears to have empowered participants, enabling them to do more than could be achieved in isolation:

Because, like, maybe they were thinking if we just do it as groups it's not really going to work. If we all come as one, then it will make us bigger and stronger... So, it's like stand up for your community.

(LON0111110702:134-137)

One participant recalled his experiences at around this time and location, describing how he began to organise and exert leadership within this newly realised social group;

When the altercations began between the police and the group it was clear there was no leadership amongst us, the group. So obviously being who I am and knowing what I know, I assumed control of the group and told them, you know, how to get things done... We started turning stuff over in the middle of the road so that if they [the police] wanted to follow us... They'd have to come on foot and fight us fairly... So obviously, I had to stress to the other ones if you separate and go by yourself the police will pick you up individually, as a group we are strong and individually you'll be arrested. (LON0610111901:138–160)

**The data also suggests** that the expression and realisation of this emergent identity, in the form of confrontational actions, was marked by a shift in collective emotions away from merely anger toward joy, pride, and celebration. Such positive emotions were described by 19 interviewees (46%):

It was celebratory, it was like, a lot of pride. Everyone was together. Apart from the burning and stuff, other than that, youths coming together that was one of the biggest things. 'Cos I've never seen so many youths come together and have no problems with each other and just have a certain problem on the police because of what the police did. (LON0610111803:100–104)

### **Agency and change: looting as an emergent possibility.**

In this rapidly evolving intergroup context, some participants described how they expected to be contained (or “kettled”) by the police:

The funny thing is that, I think a lot of people that had been in confrontation with the police before expected them to bring reinforcements down, either Bruce Grove or down north, down the High Road. So as to encircle us, if you like. Force us to disperse down the street, or practically kettle us. So, we were always looking for, we needed to stand somewhere so that we could have an exit. But it didn't come, it never came to that, not at all. (LON0111110701:169-174)

While it appears that police units did attempt such an intervention, the ferocity of the violence from the crowd prevented it. In this context, participants describe a reversal of the day-to-day disempowerment they felt historically in relation to the police. Twenty-three interviewees (56%) referred to a sense of community engendered in that context of relative empowerment, either during or after the event:

A: Then we had them under control. We had them under manners [control] for once. They never had us under manner. We had them on the lock. On smash. Running away from us. We weren't running from the police. They were the criminals today. We was enforcing the law. Getting them out of our town because they aren't doing nothing good anyway for no one.

Q: What did it feel like? That was the feeling amongst people there?

A: That was the first time I can say I felt like I'd be among a proper community. (LON1010111501:200–208)

While there was some looting of shops in and around Bruce Grove, this is described by some primarily to gather ammunition to further attack the police:

Q: And did you do anything else while you were there?

A: Well, we did the shops, but not really shops like JD to loot stuff and take different garments, just most people was rioting to get weapons and that.

Q: For the police?

A: Yeah. (LON1510111704:92-96)

While looting was said by some to be a way of gaining means to attack the police, looting was also **described as** an activity that became possible because of perceived police weakness. Sixteen participants (39%) referred to the capacity to loot these shops and engage in targeted arson attacks as **further** evidence of their collective agency and the consequential opportunities they now had available:

Cos like when that happened and they saw the police weren't doing nothing, that was when everyone started to come out and think this is the time to loot like Tottenham retail park, some jewellery shops.

(LON2710114309:39-42)

Sixteen participants (39%) described an awareness of relative capability to act collectively in a context of decreasing capability of police to prevent them. Only one respondent (2%) described feeling disempowered in this context. In other words, in the context of the riot, identity-based collective action may have **further** exposed the disempowerment of police which in turn enhanced the sense of empowerment among the rioters in an ongoing, **or historical**, intergroup process:

Q. Right... If someone wasn't there, and you're trying to say, like, if there was so many police, how was it that you could kind of get away with anything? What was the impression that you got? What was the impression that people got that made them feel like, yo, we can just do whatever we feel like?

A. Cos I think they started attacking the police, and when they saw the police was backing off they thought yeah we've gained the upper hand, we can actually do whatever we want cos we're bigger than the police.

(LON0610111403:154-162)

Moreover, by now there were others who described not being involved in the rioting but hearing about the emerging opportunities that were occurring as a function of it:

A: Well, I didn't go to like the riot and stuff. But I got another phone call from a friend saying people are meeting, and there's a shopping park just next to Tottenham and he was like "police aren't there". So, I saw it as an opportunity and I told him I would come and meet him. I went down there and started taking as much stuff as I could. (LON2910110844:25–28)

Some participants in the riot also described others moving from the crowd, **and from elsewhere**, toward the now police-free area of Tottenham Hale, where several large retailers began to be systematically looted:

They were going through the back roads and people were saying "Oh Tottenham Hale's unguarded" and, which kind of just went off point for me, because I was there for the police and the confrontation with them, was my interest, because they, to vent some frustration out on them, and how I feel they deal with us in general. That's why I was there. But obviously, people saw alternative motives. They went their separate ways type thing. (LON0111110703:89-94)

Indeed, one participant in the crowd on the High Road describes how, once the significant looting began in Tottenham Hale, he became aware that the police were not intervening to prevent it. This appears to have further enhanced his sense of collective agency and short-term opportunity:

Q: Then you, and then, at what point did it start to become...

A: More the looting?

Q: More the looting.

A: When people went to Ferry Lane. When we see [on social media], people going to Ferry Lane and they are not getting caught for it. The police are not there, the police are occupied with the rioters. When you see people looting and no one, the police aren't doing anything about it. They're not responding to situations like. If we go there and they are not doing anything what is stopping us from going to Wood Green. They are very slow to react so we have got to take this opportunity.

(LON2910110843:181-192)

As the police dispersal pushed the crowd further north, Wood Green shopping centre was less than three kilometres to the West. Fourteen participants (34%) described **their involvement in the looting**, arson or criminal damage as an expression of power over the police. One interviewee explains how they experienced and enacted their evolving motivations, **realising the vulnerability of the retail outlets in Wood Green though their capacity to initiate looting on the High Road:**

A: Personally, I didn't plan to rob anything. But we were just there and we were provoking the police, if you want to put it like that, we were provoking the police. We weren't really stealing anything. But then I saw a few people go attack local shops, stealing stuff, and because we were, the police couldn't get to us, so it was like, it was easy to steal from there.

Q: And where was that?

A: Do you know Bruce Grove [ ] near the station, the bridge, off licence there, a few Turkish shops.

Q: Oh, yeah, yeah.

A: Off license there, we took a few things and someone came up with the idea, like, if we spread this, could the police, like control it? []

Q: Specifically, the idea of spreading it came up. How did you spread it?

A: What was done was, I called as many people as I could. “Oh I hear like, everyone’s gonna go to like Wood Green”, so, call as many people as you can go to Wood Green and we’ll all go down there (LON2910110843:10–33)

As the rioting on the High Road continued, the police had little ability to react to incidents developing elsewhere. The participant describes realising the opportunity that **these transformed intergroup relations and sense of collective agency** afforded:

A: From there till [Wood] Green, a whole bunch of us walking to Green, could tell something was gonna happen. It was like, I wouldn’t say we was all friends, but at that time we was all friends. We had one motive, that was to get as many things as we can and sell it on, well, personally sell it on. So we got down to Wood Green, and then got down to a few phone shops. Anywhere you could make the most money. The phone shop next to JD [Sports] got ripped apart. (LON2910110843:38–42)

Once in Wood Green, self-organisation combined with the absence of police allowed these groups to begin collectively looting the shops. As one participant involved in the looting in Wood Green describes, their participation was experienced in positive and collective terms:

A: You know what? Out of all of the whole thing, like, I saw communities coming together [laughs]. I know it’s a bad thing, for like, everyone but at the end of the day I saw the community coming together.

Q: How so?

A: Because like, usually, cos it’s postcode gangs and that lot, like Hornsey, they have differences with Wood Green. But then again, when the riots

came, I saw Wood Green and Hornsey people just walking past each other like it was nothing like “oh help me with this”, and “you will get some of this” and just “help me out” and that’s just. It brought people together because, now, it’s like I don’t see a problem with any kind of area.  
(LON1210110402:451-460)

Moreover, for some the systematic looting was socially meaningful. Twelve respondents (29%) described it as a form of collective action that simultaneously offered financial gain and confronted the “establishment”.

### **Discussion**

Previous social psychological research has explained collective looting and attacks on property during riots as the acting out of pre-given desires or identities (Berk & Aldrich, 1972; Reicher, 1984) or has simply noted the emergence of these behaviours in the “natural-history” of a riot without adequately **explaining them** (e.g., Reicher & Stott, 2011; Stott & Drury, 2000). This study has moved beyond these previous accounts in three ways. First, it provided an analysis of the change in norms in the first of the 2011 riots, from anti-police collective action to looting and attacks on property. Second, it provided detailed evidence on the social psychological dynamics of that normative change. Third, to the extent that the nature of change in the Haringey events was different than in other dynamic conflictual events to which the ESIM has been applied, we aimed to show that ESIM principles can be developed to explain this different kind of transition.

The analysis comprised, first, the most detailed anatomy of the Haringey events yet produced. This triangulated account confirms that the initial escalation of collective conflict took place following police intervention into the crowd on Tottenham High Road (Stott et al., 2017). When this first intensification developed, it was evidently an “anti-police riot” in the first instance. While there were attacks on non-police targets in the early phase, the major change in normative action toward systematic looting developed some hours later and followed a complex pattern of historical (i.e., occurred across time) intergroup interaction, conflict and convergence.

The data suggests a series of social psychological factors were involved. First, the shooting of Mark Duggan occurred in a context of perceived structural illegitimacy, defined by our participants in terms of longstanding antagonisms and disempowerment regarding the police and other powerful actors. This structural context appears to have positioned Mark Duggan's death as identity-relevant. In other words, the fatality was meaningful because it was symbolic of ongoing illegitimacy of the intergroup context. Following the breakdown of communications between the police and Mark Duggan's family, a series of attacks were initiated upon police targets by some within the crowd and the situation became increasingly polarised.

Second, the sense of structural illegitimacy appears to have been further compounded when police reinforcements undertook their initial forceful interventions into the crowd. This escalation seems to have revolved around perceptions of the indiscriminate police use of force against a young "girl", an incident that appears to have transformed what were piecemeal sporadic attacks into a concerted collective confrontation, driving police back and forcing them to wait for further reinforcements. This retreat and subsequent reticence on behalf of the police appears to be associated with an early and emergent sense of empowerment among participants that corresponds with the first normative transition to non-police targets. Nonetheless, at this stage, many of our participants either describe some of these attacks as an extension of anti-police rioting, witnessed others actively intervening, or appear to have sought to limit their spread and impact (Stott et al., 2017).

Third, as the event progressed, it is apparent that increasing numbers of police and crowd participants converged on to the High Road. Some participants consequently began to recognise potential threats from others around them with whom they were historically involved in hostile intergroup or "postcode" conflicts. However, the shared historical experiences of antagonism with police appears to have afforded an opportunity for these participants to share a common identity in that specific and unique context of police disempowerment. This emergent shared self-categorisation seems to have provided an increasing capacity for coordinated

collective action and organisation within the crowd. As the police reinforcements began their dispersal north and south, the increased capacity of rioters to objectify their new social identity through “proactive” collective confrontation enabled them to further realise their increasing power to temporarily reverse their historical subjugation.

As ESIM would predict, there is evidence that the shift in power relations corresponded with a change in emotion from collective anger to joy. This also seems to be related to a new sense of collective agency. Indeed, evidently the two appear connected. Just as disempowerment in relation to an antagonistic outgroup feels aversive, so a new sense of agency in relation to the same outgroup feels exhilarating (Drury & Reicher, 2005).

Given their relative empowerment, some began to describe their capability to extend the riot by collectively attacking and looting the nearby retail parks. The first collective target was Tottenham Hale. As participants in the riot to the north describe becoming aware, partly via social media, of the fact that this looting was taking place unopposed, some understood the opportunities that Wood Green afforded. They describe utilising their emergent collective agency to mobilize toward the area, a decision made easier by social media and the fact that the police dispersal effectively drove some of the rioters in that direction. Moreover, once within Wood Green, many of the looters in our sample describe being able to work collaboratively as a group to break into and appropriate goods from predominantly large corporate retailers.

The analysis therefore supports our contention that the processes of normative change observed during the riot were underpinned by intergroup and identity-based processes of empowerment in a manner that is consistent with ESIM. First, there was an “anti-police” identity that was widely shared and gave meaning to police action and shaped collective (re)action. Second, the choice of and attacks on targets appear to have been shaped and constrained by this shared social identity and hence by wider definitions of legitimacy.

The drivers of collective action subsequently appeared to change, and the event went beyond a reactive riot toward proactive rioting against targets that seem to relate to longer term

structural grievances (e.g., wealth inequality, antagonism toward the “establishment”). It is our contention that this normative transformation corresponded with a subjective sense of collective agency that emerged over time directly from the ongoing identity-based intergroup dynamics of the anti-police riot on the High Road. Therefore, the other novel contribution of the present analysis is to show how the intergroup dynamics of empowerment may operate as a self-reinforcing cycle of positive feedback, depending on outgroup reactions (or lack of them). **In the present account, collective self-objectification is shown to be not simply a process of identity-assertion over the antagonistic other but also actions against the other that provide the conditions for subsequent identity-enactment.**

Thus, we suggest that the initial interactions and shared identity enabled those within the crowd on the High Road to objectify their shared anti-police identity. Second, the effects of this collective self-objectification – the impact on the street and on the police – operated both as evidence of a collective ability to effect resistance but also of the tractability of their opponents (Drury & Reicher, 2005). This ongoing combination of social identity, collective action, intergroup interaction, and dynamic power relations ultimately culminated in some participants realising their collective agency to mobilise into new locations to attack wealth and loot from corporate retailers.

Riots are difficult things to study because of their complexity and their illegality. To meet this challenge, we drew together a range of secondary data from independent sources and perspectives. Where possible we cross-referenced these sources with “hard” evidence such as contemporaneous video footage and crime reports. However, there are still dangers; specific incidents (e.g., an attack on a bus) may be initiated by one or two people and misunderstood by the observer as reflective of crowd norms. In other words, there is a danger of homogenising the crowd and its motivations based upon the actions of individuals or small groups (Hussain & Bagguley, 2009; cf. Turner & Killian, 1972). Equally, in constructing an anatomy of a riot there is a danger of incorrectly assuming underlying causality where specific incidents preceded or appear

related to others. Moreover, it may also be the case that we have missed specific incidents. Nonetheless, the quantity and quality of evidence we have drawn together has allowed us to be reasonably confident that we have developed the most accurate and detailed account of what took place in Haringey in a manner that objectively identifies the patterns of collective action as relevant to the specific research questions we have sought to address.

Another criticism that might be made is that the controversial nature of the events meant that interview responses would be subject to social desirability biases. There are several reasons why we would argue that these data should be trusted. First, in the data-set, it was clear that many interviewees described participating in actions that others might regard as wrong. Second, the description of experiences and emotions was broadly consistent across interviewees. Third, and perhaps most importantly, these participant accounts help explain the pattern identified in the triangulated evidence. Consequently, we have confidence that this data provides an extremely valuable insight into the underlying psychology of that riot.

Even taking these limitations into account, we argue that the present study provides important empirical evidence and theoretical understanding of the dynamics through which riots can change and spread. What is evident is that the data relating to the initial transition from anti-police rioting into systematic collective looting during the 2011 riots observed in Haringey can be accounted for if it is understood as an outcome of an identity-based historical intergroup process involving specific patterns of policing and relations of power. Moreover, by mapping these processes our study has enabled us to develop the ESIM by highlighting how empowerment and intergroup interaction can function as an ongoing “positive feedback” process that over time can ultimately produce forms of human agency that would not otherwise exist. It is this agency we suggest that underpinned a capacity for actors in Haringey to mobilise into new locations and act collectively to attack them.

We therefore suggest that the present analysis helps to advance theoretical understanding of the patterns of spread and change within Haringey during one night of rioting, patterns which

are common within waves of riots. However, we do not claim this is a complete account capable of explaining the broader conflagration across the next few days. One important question raised, but not answered, in the present analysis is the motivation of people joining in with events later – as we saw in the cases of people alerted by social media to the events in question. “Contagion”, a dominant media representation of such processes of influence and involvement in the 2011 English riots and at similar events (e.g., Davies, Fry, Wilson, & Bishop, 2013; Slutkin, 2011) cannot explain why some people join in and not others. **Moreover, the data does suggest that some of the looting in Wood Green and Tottenham Hale was enacted by people motivated merely by an opportunity to appropriate. However, we would contend that such explanations are not sufficient to explain the observed behavioural complexity, particularly as this relates to the *transition* from anti-police to a predominantly “consumerist” riot (cf. Treadwell et al., 2013). At the very least, the data suggests that people participated in both types of collective action, that the looting was motivated and legitimised as much by structural issues as it was by consumerism, and the latter would not have been possible if the dynamics unlocked through the former had not taken place.**

There are other, related, questions. Why for example did the riots subsequently spread into the neighbouring borough of Enfield the following day? How does this ESIM analysis of the development of agency help understand the patterns and limits of spread across London and to other cities (Baudains et al., 2012; Lewis et al, 2011; Newburn, 2016a). The present study raises these questions, not answers them. It does, however, provide preliminary foundations for understanding how to address these important questions and act as the basis upon which social psychology can contribute to the interdisciplinary dialogue necessary to fully understand how riots spread and develop.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The TSG is a specialized unit within the MPS trained to deal with serious incidents of public disorder. A typical TSG unit consists of three carriers (vans), 18 constables, and three sergeants reporting to an inspector.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that these locations were where fires were initiated. In several cases, a number of residential properties above and adjacent to these targets were destroyed by fire. However, as these were not the primary target of the arsonists they are considered by this study to be 'collateral damage'.

<sup>3</sup> A small group of local men and youths armed with bottles, rocks and sticks met on the High Road under the shopping mall (Location 25, Figure 3) and proceeded to attack a passing police car on its way to Tottenham. After smashing several shop windows and setting fire to two private vehicles on the High Road, they robbed a nearby gaming arcade. The group then threw missiles at a passing private vehicle, pushed a cyclist off his bike before assaulting him and, using materials taken from a nearby roadworks, attempted to barricade the High Road (Location 23, Figure 3).

<sup>4</sup> Each extract has a suffix which corresponds to a full transcript code and the line numbers in that transcript. When the data is made available in the public archives readers will be able to use these codes to locate the specific extract and see it in its broader context.

<sup>5</sup> In June 2011, the MPS conducted 1,614 stop-and-searches in Haringey, of these 91.4% did not lead to any arrest (Moore, 2012). Such activities were likely to have been highly racialised. In London in 2009, 210 out of 1,000 Black people were stopped compared to 76 out of 1,000 for whites (Human Rights and Equalities Commission, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> ... indicates a pause in the dialogue.

<sup>7</sup> [ ] indicates material removed for brevity.