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Social Science Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch

Threat, prejudice and the impact of the riots in England

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 June 2013

Revised 19 July 2014

Accepted 3 September 2014

Available online 2 October 2014

Keywords:

Prejudice

Riots

Minorities

Intergroup relations

Survey experiment

Threat

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how a major outbreak of rioting in England in 2011 impacted on prejudice toward three minority groups in Britain: Muslims, Black British and East Europeans. We test whether the riots mobilized individuals by increasing feelings of realistic and symbolic threat and ultimately prejudice, or whether the riots galvanized those already concerned about minorities, thus strengthening the relationship between threat and prejudice. We conducted three national surveys – before, after and one year on from the riots – and show that after the riots individuals were more likely to perceive threats to society's security and culture, and by extension express increased prejudice toward Black British and East European minorities. We find little evidence of a galvanizing impact. One year later, threat and prejudice had returned to pre-riots levels; however, results from a survey experiment show that priming memories of the riots can raise levels of prejudice.

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1. Introduction

What is the impact of a major outbreak of rioting on intergroup relations? Rioting is often a spontaneous, high profile and potentially threatening activity that violates the rule of law and established social norms. An outbreak of major rioting, even if not experienced directly by most citizens, might nonetheless have a strong impact on feelings of security and threat, intergroup relations and overall levels of prejudice in society. In August 2011, England experienced the most significant outbreak of rioting in the post-war era. Sparked by a police shooting and the subsequent death of a young, Black British male in the London-area of Tottenham, between August 6 and 9 rioting spread to other areas of London and to a lesser extent the cities of Birmingham, Leicester, Nottingham, Wolverhampton, Liverpool, Manchester and Salford ([BBC News, 2011a](#)). As these events unfolded a national debate focused on threats to resources and security, as reflected in media coverage about looting, violence and vandalism, but also the role of policing and economic deprivation in communities to which rioters belonged. It is estimated that the riots resulted in almost 2000 arrests, policing costs in London alone of £74 million, and a total cost to the taxpayer of £100 million ([BBC News, 2011b](#); [Guardian, 2011](#)). While there are good reasons to expect such an upheaval to have a strong impact on intergroup relations, mainly by increasing feelings of threat and prejudice, until now there has been little research on whether this is the case.

The impact of rioting on intergroup relationships is especially intriguing given the vast literature in the social sciences on threat and prejudice. In studies on intergroup relations it is often argued that specific contextual triggers – such as particular political campaigns, sudden influxes of migrants or downturns in macroeconomic conditions – can increase feelings of threat and, by extension, prejudice ([Fujioka, 2011](#); [Gilens, 1999](#); [Hopkins et al., 2009](#); [Huber and Lapinsky, 2006](#); [Kellstedt, 2003](#);

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Mendelberg, 2001; Quillian, 1995; Scheepers et al., 2002; Schildkraut, 2009). Such studies have sought to demonstrate how these “situational triggers” – i.e. events or interventions that can heighten the salience of threats – influence the extent to which citizens indeed feel threatened by ethnic minorities, and thus more prejudiced (Sniderman et al., 2004).¹ However, results derived from laboratory experiments are difficult to generalize to real world settings, while cross-sectional studies that rely on a combination of aggregate and survey data are unable to disentangle the causal mechanisms that connect contextual factors with feelings of threat and prejudice, leaving open the question what the impact on threat and prejudice is of a ‘real world’ trigger, such as an outbreak of major rioting.

In this paper, we fill this gap by examining the extent to which a sudden outbreak of rioting impacts on perceived threat and, by extension, prejudice overall. A sudden outbreak of rioting might be expected to be an especially strong situational trigger that heightens feelings of economic, physical and security threat and leads citizens to express prejudice toward some, or all, minorities. While not all citizens were directly affected by the 2011 riots in England, such a real world stimuli may have significantly enhanced feelings of threat from minorities, although the long-term impact of such an event remains unclear.

Based on two large, nationally representative surveys conducted immediately before and after the 2011 riots, our findings provide evidence that after the riots white Britons’ were more prejudiced toward minorities. We show how this increase was a result of individuals perceiving greater threats to their collective safety and national culture. Yet rather than exert a uniform impact, we find an impact on majority attitudes toward Black British and East European migrants, but not on those toward British Muslims. This difference, we suggest, is a consequence of media coverage that positively presented the latter group as defenders of law and order, and social norms in their local communities.

We also contribute to existing knowledge by showing the long-term impact of the riots by drawing on results from a third survey, conducted one year after the first. This suggests that one year on from the initial outbreak of rioting, perceptions of threat and prejudice had returned to pre-riots levels, although through a survey experiment we demonstrate how individuals who are primed with a memory of the rioting showed an increased level of prejudice that was equivalent to the immediate post-riots period. Overall, our findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating how a ‘real world’ trigger can mobilize stronger feelings of threat among individuals and, consequently, lead to an increase in prejudice toward minorities. Although we find a mobilizing effect, we find no evidence that the riots galvanized those already concerned about minorities by strengthening the relationship between threat and prejudice. While our results suggest that, in the aftermath of a destabilizing and threatening event, levels of threat and prejudice will eventually subside, memories of the event can still be used to trigger prejudice.

2. The impact of rioting on threat and prejudice

An outbreak of rioting in several major cities in England in 2011 allows us to examine how this sudden, destabilizing, and potentially threatening event impacted on prejudice, and what role perceptions of threat might have played. There are two ways in which this rioting might have impacted the relationship between threat and prejudice. First, the riots might have heightened feelings of realistic and/or symbolic threats and, by extension, produced an overall increase in prejudice, with threat thus functioning as a mediator (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Second, the riots might have altered the strength of the relationship between threat and prejudice; that is, the riots might have acted as a moderator (Baron and Kenny, 1986).²

Our focus on these two possible effects is rooted in an innovative experimental study of public attitudes in the Netherlands that distinguished between the two outcomes as, respectively, ‘mobilizing’ and ‘galvanizing’ effects of a situational trigger (Sniderman et al., 2004). “A situational trigger”, argue Sniderman and colleagues, “may galvanize those already concerned about a particular problem. Alternatively, it may mobilize citizens whether or not they already were disposed to be concerned about the problem” – e.g. whether or not they previously felt threatened by minorities. As they continue: “Politically, there is all the difference between galvanizing a core constituency and mobilizing a broader public. The former increases the intensity of support for a policy; the latter also enlarges the portion of the public in support of it” (2004: 36). We will consider these outcomes in turn.

2.1. Mobilizing effect of the riots

Drawing on the extant literature, our main contention is that rioting increased overall prejudice in British society, and that this occurred as a result of heightened feelings of threat. This builds on research on the role of threat in driving prejudice toward groups that are seen by the majority as threatening (Allport, 1954; Esses et al., 2001; Hjerme, 2007; Scheepers et al., 2002; Stephan and Renfro, 2002; Zárate et al., 2004). Feelings of intergroup threat occur “when one group’s actions, beliefs, or characteristics challenge the goal attainment or well-being of another group” (Riek et al., 2006: 336). An individual’s perception that their in-group is under threat from an out-group is believed to elicit a negative reaction toward the out-group in

¹ In this paper we will use the term (ethnic) prejudice according to its classic definition as “an antipathy accompanied by a faulty generalization” (Pettigrew, 1980: 821).

² Although a third possibility is that the rioting directly impacted on levels of prejudice, irrespective of any mediating role of perceived threats, we focus here on the role of threat.

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