

The law of moments: understanding the flashpoint that ignited the riots

David Waddington on how the shooting of Mark Duggan led to the August rioting

In his detailed review of major instances of public disorder in eighteenth and nineteenth century England, Stevenson (1979), remarks how 'it is often possible to pinpoint a moment when things might have turned out differently'. In 'pre-riot situations' in which crowds 'milled around', indignantly discussing their grievances and deliberating over possible courses of action, violence was sometimes skilfully averted by the calming intervention of (say) an officer or magistrate, or by a judiciously executed 'show of force'. Equally, however, a cumbersome or overzealous police action might have the opposite effect. 'Often,' concludes Stevenson, 'it was the reaction of the authorities which ultimately decided what occurred' (ibid).

Research undertaken for the past 30 years by the present author and his colleagues has focused on the role of these highly significant 'flashpoint' incidents in the instigation and escalation of more contemporary examples of disorder (e.g. Waddington et al., 1989). Such research has been striving to unravel those features of the prevailing social and political context, the relevant communication and interactional dynamics, and the immediate situation in which such incidents occur that might cause them either to simply fizzle out, or else spark off a major conflagration.

Conflicting belief systems

The resulting *Flashpoints Model of Public Disorder* (ibid) presupposes that what makes such incidents so important is their capacity to

signify an unwillingness of the parties involved in a potentially disorderly encounter (usually the police and members of a picket line, a demonstration or section of a community) to accommodate the systems of beliefs and values, interests and objectives of their rivals. Sometimes a 'pattern of accommodation' can evolve over a period of time (e.g. where police officers habitually turn a blind eye to minor instances of law breaking or drug use by street corner youths), only to suddenly and dramatically break down. Such was the case on Tottenham's Broadwater Farm estate in August 2011.

Two days after the fatal shooting by police officers on 4 August of a local 29-year-old African Caribbean resident, Mark Duggan, a crowd of 200 protesters, consisting mainly of women and children, gathered outside the Tottenham police station, demanding further details of the nature of Duggan's death and of the circumstances in which he died. The individual concerned was known to have been returning home in a taxi when he was apprehended by officers belonging to the Metropolitan Police Service's 'Operation Trident' gang control unit. Following his death, the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) automatically became involved, meaning that the formal narrative of his demise would not be available for quite some time. Initial press reports maintained that Duggan (who was allegedly a well known 'gangster') was killed in the course of a shoot out, in which a bullet from his gun lodged into one of the

policemen's radios, thereby saving the latter's life. However, it was in keeping with a growing community rejection of this version of events, and rumours that the police had something serious to hide, that the protest march occurred.

According to *The Guardian's* Hugh Muir, the protest assumed the character of a long-established ritual: 'When something bad occurs affecting the fragile relationship between the police and the black community in Tottenham – a controversial arrest, a death in custody – people march from the estates to the police station' (Muir, 2011). As was customary on such occasions, due notice had been given to the police, while the march itself was 'of textbook design', with women and children taking the lead. Muir describes how the protest had all the usual precision of a well practised dance routine, except that, 'On Saturday 6 August, the choreography went badly awry' (ibid).

Candid discussion

Custom and practice generally dictated that a high ranking officer (of superintendent level or above) would invite the protest organisers into the station for a candid discussion of their grievances. On this occasion, however, the organisers were received by a police inspector (the highest ranking officer present) who informed them there was no possibility of discussing the matter as it was now in the hands of the IPCC. A chief inspector was eventually brought in, but the organisers insisted that a more senior officer should have the courtesy to address Duggan's family. A further hour elapsed, after which the original officer returned only to remain adamant that he was the person they must talk to. Following further crowd opposition, a superintendent was eventually called for but he or she had not yet arrived by the time that most protesters had angrily given up and left. It was soon after their departure that the first signs of disorder appeared.

At least one newspaper account maintains that such conflict first broke out when local youths, who

had gathered in the wake of the protest, began stoning parked police patrol cars and pelted officers with bricks, bottles and eggs while attempting to storm the station. However, Reicher and Stott (2011) claim to have uncovered 'a slightly more complex picture that revolves around an escalation in police tactics'. According to their version, the police initially deployed cordons of officers to create a 'sterile zone' to the north and south of the station and then moved in to disperse the crowd. It was at this point that they allegedly bundled a young black woman to the ground and began hitting her repeatedly:

One can see from the videos of the incident that those nearby started to shout at the police. Their anger was evident in their words. One young woman screamed, 'It's a girl, it's a fucking girl, look how you're dealing with her, it's a fucking girl you cunts'. A young black man encouraged those around him to confront the police, shouting 'Get dem, fuckin' blood clot.' All those who describe the incident agree that this was what actually 'sparked off all the riots'.
(ibid)

The fact that the police 'victim' was little more than a girl undoubtedly intensified the incident's catalytic value. However, in order to more fully understand the causes of the Tottenham riot it is necessary to look beyond this immediate flashpoint (an encounter occurring at the *interactional* level of Waddington et al.'s model), and focus on other important antecedent causal factors, residing at the model's *structural, cultural, political/ideological, contextual* and *situational* levels of analysis.

The relationship between the first three levels is usefully highlighted in a recent analysis of the riots by Hallsworth and Brotherton (2011). In *structural* terms, the areas of 'concentrated geographical disadvantage', like Tottenham and other places in which the rioting occurred, are characterised by unacceptably high levels of youth

unemployment, failing schools and poor levels of educational attainment. The 'volatile and alienated young men' occupying these areas have been forced into *cultural* 'coping mechanisms' which are designed to 'compensate for the failure to provide jobs and work by attempting to find respect through alternative means, often through illegal means' (ibid). In extreme cases, the 'deeply internalised anger' affecting these youths has been turned inwards in the form of intra-communal violence. The police have subsequently found themselves subjected to enhanced *political/ideological* pressures - in the form of a moral panic around gang-related activity, and stern directives to stem a rising tide of burglaries and street robberies.

Accusations

Our model's *contextual* level is concerned, among other things, with such dynamic communication processes as the quality of relations between the relevant parties involved. It is clear that the intensified policing of these areas resulting from political pressure has produced an extremely negative police-community relationship. Such strategies have entailed a more prominent role for Operation Trident and a more pervasive application of stop and search procedures. Accusations that this latter form of crime control is too indiscriminate by far are borne out by statistics showing that of the 6,894 stops carried out by police officers in Haringey between April and June 2011, only 87 resulted in convictions:

But it was not just the quantity of stop and searches that became the issue. It was the manner in which these searches were conducted. There was a strong and shared sense of being treated unfairly and without due respect. This generated a sense of

grievance and of anger.
(Reicher and Stott, 2011)

Equally germane here was a growing resentment related to recent local instances of deaths resulting from police raids or detention in police custody, of which the shooting of Mark Duggan was merely the latest example. Following Duggan's death, the police had been bombarded with dire warnings of an impending community reaction. It is possible that, had more effective *proximate* channels of communication been available on the day of the Broadwater Farm protest (the *situational* level of analysis), such indignation and antagonism might possibly have been assuaged.

Clearly, however, the police had made no obvious provision for officers of sufficient seniority to receive the protest marchers and attempt to ameliorate their concerns. It was in such a highly charged and combustible atmosphere that

the flashpoint for the 2011 English riots ignited so dramatically and with such far reaching consequences. ■

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References

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