

# Disorder and distortion

Fiona Jones on media and Society responses to the riots

Over the past two months, explanations of the recent riots have not been in short supply in the media. These explanations tended to lack psychological or sociological sophistication and have had little expert input; but there have been exceptions, and a role for the Society.

Too often the rioting was attributed to 'mindless criminality' (CBBC *Newsround*, 12 August), said to be caused by 'mindless thugs' or (apparently quoting the Justice Secretary, Kenneth Clarke) a 'feral underclass'. Such unidimensional explanations avoid addressing the complex political, social and psychological issues that deserve consideration. Nevertheless, such explanations seem to have popular appeal.

Equally simplistic, as well as staggering in its inaccuracy, was a report in the *Daily Mail* (9 August) suggesting that 'Rioters have lower levels of brain chemical that keeps impulsive behaviour under control'. This was allegedly based on findings of a team of researchers led by Dr Frédéric Boy (School of Psychology, Cardiff University). An interesting summary of the real findings of the Cardiff research, as well as a description of the full scale of the distortion, can be seen in an article written for *The Guardian* by the researchers involved in the study – Dr Petroc Sumner, Dr Frédéric Boy and Dr Chris Chambers (see [tinyurl.com/3grmzgn](http://tinyurl.com/3grmzgn)).

The research showed that the concentration of the neurotransmitter GABA in part of the brain is related to a type of impulsive personality and that those who had low levels of GABA in their frontal lobes reported higher levels of 'rash impulsivity'. The story was also published by the Press Association in a newswire story which reported that the lack of a brain chemical 'spurs rioting'.

Worse still, in what Sumner and colleagues describe as 'a further creative leap', *The Sun* (10 August) claimed that a cure could be developed in the next 10 years in the form of a nose spray that might prevent drunkenness and brawling. Within a couple of days, Sumner and colleagues report, versions of the story had spread worldwide, including articles in India and Russia. In fact, they state, their research has 'almost nothing to say about rioting'.

Furthermore, it did not suggest that the lack of GABA causes impulsivity as implied by the press coverage, rather that 'the differences in GABA are simply one aspect, and possibly even the result of, a complex network of subtle differences that make each of us unique'.

Over-simplification and even gross distortions of academic research findings seem all too common (and, as these researchers have found, once the story is published, apologies for errors and retractions have limited impact). As a result, some researchers refuse to engage with the media at all. Sumner and colleagues take the opposite stance, arguing that the tabloid press have such a major impact on the public that it is crucial that scientists are involved. They even suggest that scientific press releases should be distributed 'with the strong encouragement for journalists to confirm basic facts before publication... News reports that have benefited from factual "hand-shaking" like this could be marked as "fact-checked with source", providing a measure of quality control that the

public can trust, while at the same time respecting complete journalistic independence to report critical views of the research.'

Of course, the media offer many positive opportunities and the Society's Media Centre and the Media and Press Committee constantly work to help psychologists engage the public. Society members were in high demand following the riots, and there was widespread local, national and international coverage. The Society webpages have featured nine news stories on the troubles, including Professor Christine Horrocks on 'Why do we worry more if girls riot?' and Professor Mark Griffiths on the role of social media in the riots. On the latter point, following reports of social media such as Twitter and Facebook being used to incite trouble during the disturbances, it was good to see the Society using these channels positively. Following an appeal on Twitter

by one of our members who works for the London Borough of Croydon, the Society was able to help find six volunteer counsellors to help those affected by the riots there.

Also, during the immediate aftermath of events, Society President Dr Carole Allan wrote to the Prime Minister to offer the help of the Society and its members. The letter

pointed to the range of emotions that people may be experiencing after the riots and urged 'the government to encourage anyone experiencing continued and extreme upset to contact agencies and organisations through their GPs, who provide information on how to access psychologists and counsellors'.

Society members have gone to great lengths to respond to the disturbances and are to be commended for this. The BPS, like other organisations representing scientists, faces a considerable challenge in improving the reporting of scientific findings. But as the Cardiff researchers say, while we must accept that journalists are under extreme time pressure to produce copy and to make it appealing to their readership, 'in an age where traditional journalism is under threat, where unregulated information can be found widely on the internet, and where the taxes spent on scientific research fall under ever increasing scrutiny, a focus on getting the facts straight is more important than ever.'



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The Media page is coordinated by the Society's Media and Press Committee, with the aim of

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