August 2011 will be remembered as a month of rioting. For 5 days large groups of people, many of them teenagers, looted shops and fought with police and shopkeepers defending their property. Five people died.

There are undoubtedly many causes underlying the riots and not all can be explained by psychology alone. Sociologists and economists have important perspectives to help us understand the origins of this kind of social behaviour. However, psychology can give us some insight into what happens to people during a riot, how groups behave, and how the authorities should respond.

The classical view

The way we often think of crowds — and in particular violent crowds — is as unthinking ‘mobs’. This view of crowd behaviour — including riots — comes largely from the work of nineteenth-century French researchers aiming to explain the wave of rioting across France at the time. The best known of these was Gustav Le Bon, who described people in crowds as having a ‘loss of personality’ and ‘lowering intelligence’, resulting in a ‘group mind’. Essentially he was saying that people lose their individuality in a crowd situation and unthinkingly follow the behaviour of the crowd. This approach to crowd behaviour can still be useful for explaining the response of some rioters who, after the event, speak of having ‘a moment of madness’.

This is important because, as a society, we have to decide how responsible individual rioters are for their actions. Actually, most modern social psychologists would say that Le Bon underestimated the ability of people to think rationally and maintain their own identity and personality in crowd situations like riots. This is in line with the law, which does attribute criminal responsibility to rioters.

Property damage during the riots cost around £100 million in insurance payouts

What can psychology tell us about the riots?

This summer’s news was dominated by rioting across several UK cities. Matt Jarvis looks at the psychology of rioting and how to respond to it
Extended Social Identity Model

ESIM is currently the dominant approach among social psychologists for understanding crowd behaviour (Stott 2009). According to this approach we define ourselves both as unique individuals and as members of various groups. When we are with members of a group we experience a shift in our self-perception so that we identify ourselves less in terms of our own characteristics and more in terms of membership of the group we are with. We are therefore likely to act as part of the group.

The ESIM can be useful in explaining riots. It is rare for large crowds to gather with a shared intention to be violent. Nor — according to modern social psychologists — do crowd members simply lose their individuality and join in with violence when it begins. According to ESIM, non-violent crowd members respond to a minority of violent individuals by categorising crowd members as either non-violent (us) or violent (them). However, if the authorities respond with violence towards the whole crowd then the boundaries can quickly be redrawn, with the whole crowd becoming the in-group ‘us’ and the authorities the out-group ‘them’. This is likely to lead to a violent response from the crowd and cause a full-scale riot.

Applying ESIM to crowd policing

According to Stott (2009), current police policy and training is orientated towards the ‘classic’ view of crowds rather than the modern social-psychological view. The reading material for the Public Order Commanders Course describes a crowd as ‘a device for indulging ourselves in a kind of temporary insanity by all going crazy together’.

Stott recommends that the key to effective policing of violence in crowds is to avoid the use of indiscriminate force against a whole crowd. This will lead to the crowd adopting a strong shared identity and responding collectively to the force. However, force targeted against violent individuals can have the opposite effect, leading the majority of a crowd to identify themselves as a separate non-violent group.

Activities

1. Read the Stott report in the ‘Useful sites’ box and put together a leaflet for your local police force that makes recommendations for crowd control.
2. One feature of these riots was the way some local communities banded together and fought against the rioters. Use the ESIM model to explain how and why this might have happened. How useful would Le Bon’s theory be in explaining this phenomenon?

Weblinks to follow up

You can read a newspaper account of the riots here: www.tinyurl.com/3lntvw2
Le Bon’s theory in full: www.tinyurl.com/ce7xst
Read Stott’s review of crowd behaviour and implications for crowd control: www.tinyurl.com/3necn6s
The economic effects of the rioting were not as bad as might have been expected: www.tinyurl.com/3q2rbt5

Find out more about our full range of magazines and online archives of back issues at www.philipallan.co.uk/magazines

Can police behaviour cause a protest to turn into a riot?