



the **Howard League** for **Penal Reform**

Remembering the riots

Citizenship and 'social cleansing' after the
London riots of 2011

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A report for the Howard League for Penal Reform by Chloe Peacock, based on her John Sunley Prize winning masters dissertation

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Contents

Foreword	1
Abstract	2
1 Introduction:	3
i) Background and Context	4
ii) Alternative discourses and competing moral economies	6
2. Methodology	8
i) Ethics	10
3. Findings	11
i) Negotiating discourses on the causes of the riots	11
ii) Morally evaluating the punitive response to the riots	14
iii) The riot clean-up as 'social cleansing'?	18
4. Conclusions and summary	22
Bibliography	24

Images

Fig. 1: Front cover of the <i>Daily Express</i> , 9 August 2011	4
Fig. 2: Front cover of the <i>Daily Express</i> , 10 August 2011	4
Fig. 3: Front cover of the <i>Daily Telegraph</i> , 11 August 2011	4

Foreword

In recent years the Howard League for Penal Reform has invested in commissioning and supporting post-graduate research to further our charitable and strategic objectives. As part of the strategy, the Howard League's John Sunley Prize celebrates excellence and the impact of post graduate research into penal issues. This annual award rewards and encourages Masters students who generate outstanding research dissertations that are both topical and original; and can also offer new insights into the penal system and further the cause of penal reform. Peer reviewed versions of the winning dissertations will be published by the Howard League throughout the year in an abridged format.

We are delighted to publish a version of one of the three 2014 winning dissertations here. In this paper, Chloe Peacock, who completed her Masters at the University of Sussex, provides an ethnographic exploration of the ways in which the 2011 London riots and the riot 'clean-up' are remembered and talked about.

Depoliticising, individualising and pathologising ideas about the 2011 rioters dominated much media and political rhetoric, legitimising the severe criminal justice response to the riots. This research focused on the memories, views and subjectivities of a group of young people situated geographically and socially close to the riots, to explore the ways in which dominant discourses are variously embodied, resisted and challenged.

Do look out for the next prizewinning dissertations which will be published in 2015.

Anita Dockley

Research Director, the Howard League for Penal Reform

Abstract

This report argues that a specifically neoliberal notion of citizenship underpins much of the media and political rhetoric around the London riots of 2011. Drawing on interviews with students in a South London comprehensive school, this essay explores the ways in which dominant discourses are variously embodied, resisted and challenged. The students' discussions reveal a degree of complexity that is lacking in much of the simplistic, polarised media and political coverage of the riots.

1. Introduction

The riots of 2011 have been called ‘the worst bout of civil unrest in a generation’ (*Guardian*/LSE, 2011: 1). Between 6 and 10 August, incidences of looting and damage to property occurred in many neighbourhoods of London and in towns across England (*Guardian*/LSE, 2011). The news media was saturated with images of burning buildings, looted shops, and littered streets, with riot police confronting mobs of hooded youths (see fig. 1). In stark contrast, a second set of images emerged from the unrest: the spontaneous, community-spirited clean-up operations arranged by individuals and groups across London, cleansing neighbourhoods of the debris left behind by the unrest (see fig. 2). Co-ordinated largely through Twitter, these clean-ups brought hundreds of people out onto the streets, often armed with brooms which were to become a symbol of community spirit, togetherness and ‘resistance’ against the rioters (De Castella, 2011).

This report provides an ethnographic exploration of the ways in which the 2011 London riots and the riot ‘clean-up’ are remembered and talked about. Much media and political rhetoric has framed the riots as meaningless and apolitical, and has pathologised rioters and their families (and, in some cases, their communities). This rhetoric has served to naturalise a severe criminal justice response to the riots, and has underpinned widespread praise for those who ‘cleaned up’ after the riots. At the same time, alternative narratives have emerged, emphasising the political nature of the riots, and framing the riot clean-up as ‘social cleansing’ of marginalised groups from the social body. This report argues that at the heart of the dominant media and political discourses lie certain notions of citizenship and justice. These prioritise individual agency, morality and responsibility, obscure structural inequalities and construct a divisive and exclusive notion of community (Harvey, 2005; Tyler, 2013).

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the summer of 2013 with a group of sixth form students in a South London comprehensive school, this report examines some of the ways in which dominant media and political discourses have been variously embodied, resisted and challenged. The study provides a contextualised, localised and personalised account of these discourses, and the ways in which they were negotiated by a group of girls who were, geographically and socially, at the centre of many of the debates surrounding the riots. While the dominant narratives circulated in the media appear to define the boundaries of the girls’ moral imagination of the riots, these are challenged by other moral economies, creating nuanced and complex attitudes that reflect the students’ subjective positioning in relation to the riots.

Though there has been a huge amount of debate around the riots from politicians, journalists, academics and the public at large, this has often been simplistic, generalising and universalising. This research aims to contribute to the critical literature on these dominant neoliberal discourses (see e.g. Tyler, 2013; Himmelblau, 2011; Slater, 2011) by showing the diverse, complex and often contradictory ways in which cultural and moral meanings around the riots are constructed and negotiated within a specific social context. In contrast to the polarised debate that has been played out in the media and political spheres, this research reveals ambiguity, nuance and an interweaving of competing moral claims.

In this introduction, this research is situated within the relevant existing literature on the riots and the clean-up, and within broader anthropological literature and debates.

i) Background and Context

Like many riots in Western countries in the contemporary era, the 2011 riots occurred in the aftermath of the death of a young person from a marginalised neighbourhood at the hands of the police (Fassin, 2013). In this instance, the spark was the fatal shooting of 29-year-old Mark Duggan in Tottenham by the Metropolitan Police on 4 August that year. Clashes with police occurred at a protest by Duggan's friends and family two days later (Lewis, 2011), and 'copycat' riots broke out across the city.



Fig. 1: *Daily Express*, 9 August 2011. Fig. 2: *Daily Express*, 10 August 2011. Fig. 3: *Daily Telegraph*, 11 August 2011.

The Coalition Government and much of the mainstream media (figs. 1 and 3) were quick to frame the riots as an apolitical and shocking display of 'looting, violence, vandalising and thieving': an inexcusable outburst of 'criminality pure and simple' (Cameron, 2011a). This narrative 'explained' the riots in terms of moral collapse and a 'broken society': a meaningless outburst of a 'sick' (or, in then Justice Secretary Ken Clarke's words, 'feral') underclass characterised by greed, irresponsibility, worklessness, laziness, welfare dependence and poor parenting (Clarke, 2011; Cameron, 2011a and 2011b; Tyler, 2013). As Lea (2011) points out, this political response – though typical in the twenty-first century – is strikingly different to the discourses that emerged around earlier riots, such as the Brixton riots of April 1981. In 1981 the Scarman inquiry identified 'a normal community with a legitimate grievance' which took the form of a rational, if not acceptable, outburst of anger and resentment against the institutionally racist police force (Lea, 2011). Accordingly, the recommended response to the riots was based on drawing marginalised and deprived – but not dysfunctional or pathological – communities into an inclusive rights-based welfare state (Lea, 2011).

Drawing on individualising and pathologising narratives of blame and responsibility, the dominant rhetoric in 2011 exemplified a broader shift in the meaning of citizenship in recent political discourse in Britain, whereby citizenship has been 'redesigned as a technology of neoliberal governance' (Tyler, 2013: 197–198; Colomb, 2007).¹ Under New Labour and the Coalition Government, liberal understandings of citizenship, as a universal status that offers rights and protections, have been displaced by categories of 'active' and 'earned' citizenship' (Colomb, 2007). Success or failure is, then, attributed not to systemic or structural factors but to individuals' 'entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings' (Harvey, 2005: 65), and those who fail to earn their citizenship are marginalised, excluded and expelled from the social body (Tyler, 2013). A neoliberal notion of citizenship has been reinforced and reinvigorated in the Conservative narratives of 'Broken Britain' and the 'Big Society', which have sought to blame poverty firmly on the poor (Slater, 2011), to legitimise the rolling back of the welfare state, and to naturalise increasing inequality (Colomb, 2007; Tyler, 2013).

Much of the media and political rhetoric around the riots has situated rioters (and their families and communities) as irrational, irresponsible, failed and excluded citizens. In stark contrast, there was overwhelmingly positive coverage of the riot clean-up. Framed as a 'civilised majority' of responsible, entrepreneurial broom-wielding citizens 'reclaiming the streets' (De Castella, 2011), David Cameron praised those who took part in the clean-up as 'the best [of the British people]' – in direct contrast to 'the worst': 'the thugs' committing 'the most sickening acts on our streets' (Cameron, 2011b).

This rhetoric, which framed the riots exclusively as crime rather than protest, served to justify a severe punitive response (both judicial and economic) to the riots (Tyler, 2013). Much of the debate around the riots, in the media and among politicians (Gardiner, 2011; Clarke, 2011), and, to a certain extent, in academic research (e.g. Bell et al., 2014), has focused on bringing rioters 'to justice'. Drawing on individualised and decontextualized understandings of responsibility, morality and fairness, this rhetoric has emphasised a particular legal notion of justice, calling for tough policing, widespread arrest, swift trials and severe sentencing to punish and deter. These calls were met by a harsh response from the police, who arrested thousands in the weeks following the riots, and the courts, which handed out unusually severe sentences (Baggini, 2011). By early September 2011, a few weeks after the riots, almost 4,000 people had been arrested. By October, 1,984 suspects had faced prosecution, 551 sentences had been handed out and an immediate custodial sentence was given in 331 cases, with the average custodial sentence length being 12.5 months (Berman, 2011).

The notion that rioters must be harshly punished gained extra currency within the current context of 'austerity' politics, as rioters were accused not only of criminal damage but of destroying their own communities by selfishly and irrationally rejecting austerity (De Benedictis, 2012). As Boris Johnson, Mayor of London (cited in De Benedictis, 2012: 15), said in a speech to those gathered to clean up in Clapham Junction:

I ask anybody who has the faintest vestige of sympathy with [the rioters] to ask yourself 'what is the good in times of economic difficulty in raiding and destroying businesses that are the life blood of our community and that give people jobs?' Where is the sense in that?

¹ See also Harvey, 2005; Ong, 2006; Foucault, 2008; Ferguson, 2010; Wacquant, 2010 and 2012; Comaroff, 2011; Hilgers, 2011, 2012 and 2013; Peck and Theodore, 2012; and Collier, 2012 for anthropological debates on the nature and form of neoliberalism, and the complex and contested relationship between neoliberal structures, institutions and policies, and neoliberal 'dispositions'.

As a commentator in the *Telegraph* wrote,

the only immediate response to this kind of mindless violence is zero tolerance from the police and the government in power, and a willingness to put those responsible behind bars [...] Britain is on the precipice of unprecedented levels of public disorder which must be decisively met with a firm determination to quell the riots and bring every one of these violent thugs to justice.
(Gardiner, 2011)

These depoliticised and pathologising narratives have dominated media and political discourses around the riots, shaping 'common-sense' assumptions about the causes of the riots and the meaning of the clean-up, and defining acceptable moral attitudes towards rioters. However, other narratives have emerged, challenging the stories told by much of the media.

ii) Alternative discourses and competing moral economies

In contrast to the discourses around the 'causes' of the riots espoused by much of the mainstream media and the Coalition Government, broadly left-wing commentary and some academic analysis has emphasised the role of structural, socio-economic and political inequalities in the context of the financial crisis and the politics of austerity. The *Guardian* and the London School of Economics' (2011) project Reading the Riots suggests that a profound sense of injustice among young people, who have been particularly affected by high unemployment, drastic government cuts to welfare, education and youth services, as well as brutal and discriminatory policing practices, was a motivation for many of the rioters (*Guardian/LSE*, 2011). The analysis also highlights frustration caused by increasing levels of economic inequality, the MPs' expenses scandal, the bailout of the banks and the debate on bankers' bonuses. In contrast and direct challenge to the argument that the riots were apolitical, academics have framed the events of August 2011 as a reaction to these factors, with some calling for the unrest to be understood as a protest or 'mass insurrection' (Darcus Howe, cited in Hersh, 2011). This sense of injustice can also be traced in an alternative discourse on criminal justice responses to the riots, with many calling the severe sentencing of rioters 'out of proportion' and unfair (Baggini, 2011), especially in contrast to the leniency – or impunity – shown to MPs and bankers for their arguably more serious crimes of theft and criminal damage (Himmelblau, 2011).

In comparison to the vast amount of debate around the riots and sentencing, there appears to be very little critical literature on the riot clean-up. Sofia Himmelblau (2011) links the riot clean-up to a notion of neoliberal citizenship that seeks to constitute and expel those 'failed' citizens (see fig. 2). Against the 'strikingly white and middle-class' make-up of the 'bourgeoisie of Clapham', embodying "blitz-spirit", keep-calm-and-carry-on clap-trap and colonial Kipling-esque "keeping your head", the state casts rioters as an enemy

responsible for all manner of society's ills through their 'feckless', 'immoral' and 'animalistic' behaviour. In doing so they seek to create a group that all of those who are 'all in it together' can hate equally, and around which the illusion of the big society can coalesce.
(Himmelblau, 2011)

In the context of neoliberal citizenship, the clean-up represents the 'symbolic social cleansing' of rioters and their families, and serves to further obscure the structural and economic inequalities at the heart of the unrest (Himmelblau, 2011).

This report explores the ways in which these competing discourses are variously embodied, negotiated and challenged in conversations between a group of 16- and 17-year-old girls² from South London. These girls have grown up in a context where pathologising and depoliticising dominant discourses, drawing on certain ideas about citizenship, justice and morality, have been pervasive. These discourses do, to some extent, appear to shape the boundaries of their moral imagination of the riots. Nevertheless, the girls also draw on competing moral claims, to construct narratives that are complex and multi-layered in comparison to the dogmatic and polarising dominant rhetoric.

2 The term 'girls' is used rather than 'women', since this is how the students tended to refer to themselves.

2. Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on a series of semi-structured group discussions³ conducted with a group of 15 AS-level sociology students (girls aged 16 and 17) on one day in July 2013. The participants were students at a comprehensive girls' state school, in an inner-city area of South London, and the interviews took place at their school. After watching a three-minute video report from the *Daily Telegraph* website, depicting the 'riot clean-up' in Clapham Junction (*Daily Telegraph*, 2011), we had a 30 minute discussion as a whole class, before breaking into three smaller groups for 15-minute sessions. All the discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed and manually coded.

The methodology of the research reflects the relatively short period of time available for conducting research for a Masters degree. I established contact with the school after using personal contacts and networks to invite professionals in schools, colleges, sports teams and youth clubs to become involved with the research. Most did not respond or were not able to participate: the summer timing meant schools were busy with exam periods, and there was not sufficient time to arrange the special ethical clearance necessary to work with participants aged under 16. The research was thus limited to young people aged 16 and over, many of whom were taking GCSEs or further education exams at that time. Others may have been concerned about the nature of the research and how it might affect young people who had been involved in the riots. The head of Sixth Form at the school where the research took place was interested in the research and keen for his sociology students to be given the opportunity to participate in the kind of research project they might conduct themselves should they go on to study social sciences at degree level. The students were also beginning a series of classes on crime and criminology, so the subject area was relevant.

Conducting research in a school setting, while posing its own challenges and limitations, allowed me to work with a group of young people who knew each other, were used to discussing topics together, and were in a familiar setting. This, I hope, created a relatively open and comfortable environment and allowed the research to explore the complex ways in which individuals and groups navigate discourses.

Much anthropological research is based on long-term, immersive participant observation. This was not feasible for this study, but the methodology chosen allowed for an examination of the ways in which the riots were remembered and spoken about at a specific moment and in a specific social context. In contrast to much of the work that has been done, this report does not attempt to provide a definitive explanation or interpretation of the riots. The group interviewed is in no way intended to be 'representative' – in terms of experiences or attitudes – of any larger demographic. Nor can the interviews be seen as representative of the interviewees' 'real' opinions. Rather, like all anthropological knowledge, the interviews are the (partial, subjective, contextual) product of the interaction between researcher and participants (Rabinow, 1977). Within this interaction, my own identity, as perceived by myself and by the interviewees, also plays a role. I cannot know for sure how the interviewees located me in terms of age, race, class and role (I am white, middle-class and in my mid-twenties), but the interviews and my analysis of them should be read with this in mind.

³ I had originally intended to carry out some one-to-one interviews after the initial group discussion. However, an unexpectedly high number of girls chose to stay on after the group discussion, and said they would prefer to be interviewed in groups. These group interviews in fact provided rich discussions, and prompted quieter girls to contribute. The fact that all the interview material comes from group discussions, where the girls were with their classmates, shapes the way in which their statements should be read.

The non-selective girls' school in which the interviews took place was located close to a major road in an inner city area of South London. In the popular imagination, the area is thought of as economically deprived and ethnically diverse (Trust for London/New Policy Institute, 2011). The class was racially mixed, with a large majority of black students and a minority of white and Asian girls. This description is used to contextualise later discussions, which draw on the girls' ways of thinking and talking about 'race'. My description of the 'ethnic' makeup of the class is largely according to my own perceptions, and I do not intend to make a categorical statement about the girls' subjective identities. My own assumptions and perceptions, alongside the girls' own statements about class (explicit and implicit), suggested that some of the students identified as working-class, others as middle-class.⁴ The fact that the group was made up only of girls adds an interesting dimension to the research, though gender is not a key theme in the analysis (but see Topping et al., 2011 on the women who rioted, and Allen and Taylor, 2012 on gender and the riots).

The fact that the girls were sociology students was evident in much of the discussion, and explicitly sociological concepts such as 'status', 'stereotyping', 'relative deprivation' and 'subculture' cropped up frequently. Race and class were discussed with apparent confidence and comfort, in stark contrast to Byrne's (2006) account of young mothers in South London, for whom race and class evoked awkwardness or evasiveness. In our discussions, these terms were used freely, but in specific ways, which, I argue, reflected some ambivalence and tensions.

Anthropologists have long been concerned with the experiences of young people and their social roles (Durham, 2012; see Mead, 1928 for an early example). Research with young people provides a fascinating opportunity to examine the imagination of personhood, morality and power, since 'the developmental issues that young people negotiate are an important component of an analytic of power and the channels through which it flows in the process of cultural production' (Durham, 2012). Ethnographic research with young people provides a particularly interesting opportunity for examining the embodiment, or otherwise, of dominant discourses (see e.g. McGinnis, 2009; Coe and Nastasi, 2006; see also Skeggs, 2013 and Massey, 2013 on the embodiment and negotiation of discourses of neoliberalism).

In the context of the riots, young people occupy an important and interesting social position. For the girls who took part in the discussions on which this report is based, the riots had been a major cultural presence and a focus of political and moral discourses at a time when they were negotiating their identities and attitudes in relation to their social worlds. Young people are facing social and economic challenges posed by rising unemployment, increases in university tuition fees and harsh cuts to education and activities (see e.g. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012; Gil, 2014). At the same time, the dominant media and political discourse on the riots has focused overwhelmingly on the 'problem' of young people, but has rarely focused on their opinions, experiences or perspectives. Where this has been done (e.g. *Guardian* and LSE, 2011), rioters themselves – usually male – have been prioritised. In contrast, this research looks at the ways in which the riots are understood by an 'ordinary' (though by no means representative) group of girls.

4 In London there are a number of single-sex, non-selective state schools, and this does not imply the same privileged or selective background that single-sex schools are often associated with.

i) Ethics

Conducting research into the riots clearly raises a number of ethical issues. Some of these issues are fairly simple to resolve; others less so. The girls were not asked about their direct involvement in the riots,⁵ but some of them may have had personal experience of the riots in some way, or may have found it an uncomfortable or upsetting subject to discuss. All of the participants were provided with an information sheet two weeks in advance of the session, setting out the aims of the research and informing them that participation was entirely voluntary, and that interviewees and the school would be anonymised in transcripts and any written material.⁶

Despite these considerations, it is possible that there may have been an element of pressure to participate when interviews were in a school setting, where attendance is ordinarily compulsory and where an authority figure has vouched for the interviewer's presence. There are also complex debates around the politics and ethics of representation in anthropological research, including the argument that 'researching' and 'representing' necessarily involves an imbalance of power (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986), particularly at the stage of analysing and writing (Byrne, 2006). I tried to ensure interviews were relaxed, friendly and non-judgemental. On the whole, interviewees appeared to enjoy the interviews and the opportunity to discuss their experiences and opinions in a relatively unstructured and free environment, and in some cases said so. Throughout this report I have used pseudonyms to protect the girls' identities. I have tried to be faithful to (what I interpret as) the intention of their statements.

⁵ If this had arisen, the interview would have been stopped.

⁶ Immediately before the session, participants were again reminded of these points. Before the group discussion, and again before the small group interviews, I left the room in order to give participants a chance to leave should they want to.

3. Findings

i) Negotiating discourses on the causes of the riots

This section shows how the girls navigated the dominant media discourses around the ‘causes’ of the riots in complex – and sometimes contradictory – ways, mediating between a depoliticised account of ‘meaningless criminality’ and an explicitly political narrative which emphasises collective frustrations and socio-economic inequalities faced by a marginalised group.

Some girls’ narratives around people’s motivations for taking part in rioting and looting adhered fairly closely to the notion that individual greed and recklessness were at the root of the riots. Of all the girls in the group, Kate – a black student from South London – seemed to embody this discourse most comfortably throughout our discussions.

*I think that, probably, saying that people done it because of the government might just be an excuse for people’s fun. Because if they really done it because of the government, then it would have happened a long time ago and the Mark Duggan thing wouldn’t have had to start it off.
[...]*

*Most young people that were involved, they just went to steal things because it was an easy opportunity.
(Kate)*

Other students, in contrast, emphasised the social and economic problems facing young people; and particularly tensions with an oppressive, out of touch and institutionally racist police force. Lucia, a black student from Croydon (an area closely associated with the riots in the public imagination, due to the burning down of a large and established furniture business) often expressed the most critical views, resisting the dominant discourses even when this meant challenging the other girls in the group.

*Not everyone rioted to get stuff. They done it out of frustration, too. It’s not just to get things. It’s like, everyone came – well, not me – but everyone came together to like do it, against the police and the things that they’ve done.
(Lucia)*

This narrative echoes the broadly left-wing discourse around the riots, embodied by a number of other students. Shona, a black student from Peckham, consistently provided interesting and complex statements that in many ways wove between different established narratives, raising nuanced points. Reacting to a classmate’s view that the riots were meaningless and apolitical, she said:

*I think it wasn’t just doing it for the sake of it. I think it had, like, a purpose behind it. Like, because they were frustrated at the police and the government, young people – OK, I shouldn’t say young people – but the rioters, they... I don’t know how to explain it, but, like, because they don’t have a voice for people to actually speak up for them, I think that’s the only way they actually found they could get their point across. Like, we’re angry with the police and the government, so we’ll do damage to what we can get to, to actually make that point.
(Shona)*

As another student put it, 'In order for people to get heard these days, you have to do something so extreme'. For Shona, the fact that the rioters were not engaged in organised politics did not preclude the possibility that their actions were political. Rather, her point echoes critics who have raised concerns about the lack of opportunities for 'legitimate' and effective political action among marginalised groups. Andrew Sanchez (2011) argues that the shape of the unrest, seen as largely disorganised, lacking formal political demands and with a particularly materialistic bent, is a reflection of a decimation of working-class community consciousness. While the 1981 riots articulated the disenfranchisement of certain communities from the wider British society, the riots of 2011 might be seen as the result of the profound alienation of individuals within those communities from one another (Sanchez, 2011; see also Bauman, 2011; Žižek, 2011; and Harvey, 2012 on the role of consumerism and looting in the riots).

It is interesting to see how Kate responded to Shona with an argument that would be levelled against the Occupy movement's occupation of St Paul's churchyard a few weeks later⁷, and debated in relation to the Arab Spring: that political protest must have a clear programme, and formulate clear demands (Harcourt, 2011; Khanna, 2012):

The government don't know exactly what they're angry about, 'cause no one's really telling them. They're just trashing the place. And the government's like, 'Oh, what are we supposed to do?', because they don't really know exactly what the problem is.
(Kate)

Shona's response to this suggests a complex mediation of narratives that have, in much debate, been polarised. On the one hand, she rehearses a typically right-wing explanation of 'culture' and 'values', arguing that working-class children are not instilled with the 'right' values. Yet, on the other hand, she maintains that the government are to blame for failing to 'understand' the rioters:

But you know like...when children go to school and they go to, like, poorer schools, and then there's middle class children, and they're educated differently. And, I don't know, like they're socialised differently. So they're taught to do things in different ways. And maybe, like, the posher children are taught the right way and the lesser off children are taught the wrong way. [...] I think, then again, the government was at fault for kind of failing them [the rioters]. OK, obviously families play a part, but failing them, for them to not be, like, able to express themselves in the way that the government would be able to understand them. So, then again, the government's at fault for not being able to understand their way of being able to put across their feelings.
(Shona)

The views that the girls expressed in the discussions are perhaps best understood as an interesting product of the social dynamics of the group conversation, rather than a fixed or pure opinion. Nevertheless, the diversity and complexity of the conversation is a refreshing contrast to the simplistic and polarised discourses rehearsed in much of the debate around the riots. Shona here draws on the idea that the rioters might have had 'the wrong values', yet she is sympathetic with the frustrations facing many young people. Her narrative has none of the pathologising and punitive tone of the 'cultural' explanations outlined above.

⁷ Occupy the London Stock Exchange' was part of the global Occupy movement, driven by dissatisfaction with the current political and economic system, and based on principles of democracy and horizontality. The Occupy movement was widely criticised in the mainstream media, even when coverage was broadly sympathetic, for failing to engage with the existing political system, and for lacking a clear set of demands or a concrete vision for an alternative (see for e.g. Keller, 2011).

On the whole, most students tended to acknowledge the social, economic and political problems underlying the riots, especially those facing young people, and saw Mark Duggan's death as the spark that ignited the unrest. Nevertheless, the group drew a clear boundary between the 'legitimate' protest of a small group of Tottenham residents around Mark Duggan's death, and the widespread looting and rioting that followed. As Olivia, a white student, put it, echoing a common refrain in public discourse: 'I don't understand what stealing a TV's got to do with someone being shot by the police' (see Theresa May cited in Doyle, 2011). Others made similar distinctions:

I think the beginnings of the riot, to find out what happened with Mark Duggan, that was alright, like that was for a good cause. Then when it got out of hand, and everyone just started looting and being violent, that was wrong. I think it was the wrong time and for the wrong reasons. They were being opportunists.
(Natasha)

I kind of agree with what Natasha was saying, like at the start it was for a good cause. But then when the riots started spreading, it's like it kind of lost its cause, like it lost a reason.
(Kelly)

A strong assertion, or common-sense assumption, that the riots are self-evidently bad, and ultimately inexcusable, ran through all of the discussions. Some of the girls remembered feeling shocked and fearful during the riots, and expressed a sense that the riots were experienced as an external threat, thereby positioning themselves in relation to the riots in particular ways.

I think it felt like it was just gonna get closer to – it didn't affect my area, but it just felt like, 'cause it was like on the borders of where I was, so I just thought oh, OK, it's coming. 'Cause it seemed like it was just like water that was just spreading everywhere.
(Zoe)

In contrast, Lucia's response was not one of fear of the rioters, but of concern around the shooting of Mark Duggan:

CP: Was everyone's parents and families scared, or...?

Lucia: My parents wasn't scared. They just saw it more as the situation with the guy that died, instead of everyone rioting and looting, 'cause that happened after, only because of the police didn't disclose information that they should have done.

Lucia was also the only student to talk openly about social links she had with people who had been involved in the riots, saying 'she had heard for herself from people' what went on during the riots, thereby positioning herself within that realm. However, even Lucia appeared to make a careful attempt to differentiate herself from 'the rioters': 'It's like, everyone came – well, not me – but everyone came together to do it [riot], against the police and the things that they've done'.

Other students seemed keen to distance themselves from the riots, geographically and socially. Apart from one student, Kate, who defended the idea that it was primarily 'black boys' who took part in the riots, the majority of the girls were keen to state that the rioters could not be characterised by age, race, or class.

I think like when [the media] say like the only people that rioted were black people, they're just playing on it too much, like there was so... I guarantee, like people from all

different ethnicities was probably involved in the riots and involved in the clean ups, but then they're just playing it like the black people were the ones that rioted and the white people were the ones that cleaned it up, when it was not like that at all. It was like a mixture of everything.

(Jade)

Kelly echoed this, arguing that the media had focused on young people while in reality young people made up only a proportion of those who rioted:

CP: So do you think the media sort of simplifies it?

Kelly: Yeah. They try to paint us as bad, but we're not... So it just shows, not everyone is stupid enough to participate in the riots.

The idea that the majority of young people are 'not stupid enough' to riot reflects the dominant discourse whereby rioting is seen as irrational and irresponsible, and the result of a lack of 'values'. In the context of a popular narrative which demonises and de-humanises rioters, and praises those involved in the clean-up, it is hardly surprising that some young, black students should want to resist discourses in which whiteness is associated with the (community-spirited, responsible, and entrepreneurial) clean-up, while blackness is equated with the (destructive, criminal, and irrational) riots. The media and political rhetoric casts rioters as violent, irrational non-citizens, and to some extent this seems to define the limits of the girls' moral imagination of the riots: the riots, even if understandable, are to be condemned. At the same time, however, the girls' personal experiences, positionality as young, mainly black, often working class, people in London, and the alternative narratives around the meaning of the riots, appear to shape their moral responses to the riots. It is not only 'the rioters' who are being hit hard by unemployment, discriminatory policing practices and demonising media representation: many of the girls themselves indicated that they felt these problems had got worse in the two years since 2011. This understanding seems to prevent the demonising discourses from flowing unchallenged. This complexity is also evident in the girls' discussions around the appropriate punishment of rioters.

ii) Morally evaluating the punitive response to the riots

This section explores how the girls embodied, resisted and challenged the dominant discourses that naturalised and legitimised the severe criminal justice response to the riots. The notion that theft or criminal damage of any type is essentially and necessarily wrong shaped the discussions, and a notion of individual morality and responsibility was assumed, which legitimated retributive and deterrent punishment. At the same time, however, some challenged the idea that severe sentencing is fair or effective. Others drew on moral economies of kinship and social justice, which challenge the dominant discourses that called for harsh punishment of rioters.

We discussed the sentencing of two young men who were jailed for four years for using Facebook to encourage a riot, despite the fact that no rioting resulted from their efforts (BBC News, 2011).

I think they do probably deserve it, because that way they would probably learn that if they did this kind of stuff, they'd know the consequences and stuff. If they were sent off with a warning they'd probably do it again.

(Faith)

This idea fits within a discourse of crime and punishment that has emphasised deterrence, rather than rehabilitation, as a key aim of punishment in contemporary society. Chanel and Kelly both questioned the assumption that harsh punishment is an effective deterrent, instead emphasising the fact that the social and economic conditions and harsh policing that led to the riots had, if anything, become worse over the last two years, and so predicted that more riots were likely to happen in the future:

A lot of the youths were complaining that they don't have jobs. And, for example, Michael Gove's making it so hard for people to go to university. And inevitably if you're not getting decent money you will resort to crime – well, I wouldn't, but people will resort to crime. So if they're still frustrated that they don't have a status in society, they will resort to crime. Riots will be worse.

(Chanel)

Four years for saying come and riot. I know it's bad, but there's people who are convicted of stealing and stuff who should get sentences like that, not people who write petty statuses on Facebook saying 'come and riot'. That's too much. I think it's because it happened at the time and they thought, 'yeah give them four years, it'll teach them a lesson not to do it'. But even if they do give them four years I can guarantee it won't intimidate them not to do it. It's gonna happen in the future. It's going to. I can see another riot happening.

(Kelly)

As Kelly does, others highlighted the 'unfairness' of the sentencing, challenging the notion that the sentences represented proportional retribution.

[The prisons] need space for real crime. I think they'll get let out earlier than four years, 'cause there's people who've done worse things. Like, I know it's out of context, but someone like George Zimmerman⁸ doesn't go to prison, and someone writes a status on Facebook and goes to prison for four years. [...] If you just compare it, it's not fair.

(Kate)

You know like when Damilola Taylor⁹ got killed? The boys got, like, really short sentences and they got released, like, so quick. People like that need to be in prison for their whole entire life. And I know, like, writing a status, I don't agree with that. You shouldn't have written that, but you did and it didn't happen, so there should be a bit of leeway. And I do understand why they did give the harsh sentences, but there should be a bit of leeway and let proper criminals be in prison.

(Faith)

In part, the girls were criticising the fact that these men were punished for their actions even though these had no serious consequences. Yet it is also interesting that the 'proper criminals' who Kate and Faith perceive to have been treated with undue leniency are the killers of Damilola Taylor and Trayvon Martin, both killers of black boys. In our discussions, several of the girls talked about racism, and particularly prejudice against black boys, among the police and criminal justice systems. In this context, it is unsurprising that some girls challenged the dominant discourse that the severe sentencing of rioters was 'fair'.

⁸ Neighbourhood watch leader George Zimmerman was acquitted of murder in July 2013 after shooting dead the unarmed black 17-year old Trayvon Martin in Florida in February 2012 (BBC News, 2013).

⁹ 10-year-old Nigerian schoolboy Damilola Taylor died after being stabbed in the leg in Peckham by brothers Danny and Ricky Preddie, then aged 12 and 13, in November 2000. In 2006, the brothers were sentenced to eight years in youth custody for manslaughter, and both were paroled after 5 years (Guardian, 2012).

Other critiques of the punishment of rioters drew on ideas of family loyalty, revealing complex moral economies of justice apart from and beyond the dominant legalistic discourse. In one of the small group discussions, Mia added to the debate on the clean-up by bringing in some other ways in which she saw people 'cleaning up'.

I think people helped towards [cleaning up] the riots in different ways. Like some people did the clean-up. I know one woman, it was on the news, she took her daughter to the police station and handed her in for her actually being a part of the riots. I think people tried to clean things up, the whole thing up in general, really quickly.
(Mia)

The discussion that followed on the morality of this means of 'cleaning up' uncovered competing discourses and moral economies. Mia was referring to Chelsea Ives, an 18-year-old athlete and 'Olympic ambassador' from East London whose parents turned her in to the police after spotting her in TV news coverage of the looting. She was jailed for two years in November 2011, after being convicted of burglary and damaging property (Freeman and Moore-Bridger, 2011).

Interviewer: What do you think about that, about the mum taking her daughter to the police station?

Mia: I thought it was good.

Lucia: You thought it was good?!

Kelly: My mum said she would've done the same to me, you know.

Shamara: I don't see it like it was a bad thing. She was doing something wrong, so...

Shamara's idea that 'she was doing something wrong', and so morally should be punished, reflects the rhetoric of retribution that was dominant in the media and political coverage of the riots (Clarke, 2011; Gardiner, 2011) and which ran through much of our other discussions.

Chelsea Ives' parents were celebrated in the media as 'responsible' citizens, epitomising the ideals of active, entrepreneurial citizenship and the key role of parents in the context of neoliberal austerity (De Benedictis, 2012). Adrienne Ives is quoted as saying, 'These riots happen because good parents do nothing [...] As parents we had to say, "She can't get away with that" [...] I had to do the right thing' (*Daily Mail*, 2011). In this way, the girls' assertion that Ives' mother was doing the right thing suggests a certain adherence to the dominant discourses around the riots:

I think she also done it to show her like, you know...to say, to basically tell her, you know, 'what you done is wrong'. You know, 'I'm not gonna let you get away with it'. [...] So it's to show her, you know, 'you were in the wrong, so I'm gonna take you into my own hands and take you to the police'.
(Mia)

Anthropologists have argued that the logic and language of neoliberalism fundamentally transform experiences of crime and insecurity and shape responses to it (Goldstein, 2005). While the socio-economic conditions of neoliberalism lead to expansive inequality and rising crime rates, neoliberal ideals of decentralization, localism and 'flexibilization' lead to a blurring of lines between state and private forms of violence, and a notion that citizens should be vigilant and self-reliant (Goldstein, 2005; Godoy, 2006; Pratten and Sen, 2007). Neoliberalism thus creates 'unprecedented opportunities and motives for citizens to take the law into their own hands' (Pratten and Sen, 2007: 2). In the context of the riots, this

10 See also Wacquant's (2008) account, which emphasises the role of the (neoliberal Centaur) state in enforcing severe punishment at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

is reflected in The Sun's 'Shop a Moron' campaign, asking readers to 'name and shame rioters' (Tyler, 2013). This rhetoric is echoed in media and political celebration and 'hero' rhetoric around other people who took rioters and the dispensing of justice 'into their own hands'. Groups of residents and business-owners 'defending the streets' were broadly praised, particularly in the right-wing media. The *Telegraph* praised the Turkish shopkeepers in Hackney – who guarded their businesses against looters during the riots, armed with knives and baseball bats – as 'decent citizens' and 'the heroes of recent days', linking their actions explicitly to Cameron's 'Big Society' rhetoric (Moore, 2011). A writer from the conservative Adam Smith Institute used the moment to call for a further shift towards neoliberal policy, calling for the Government to let citizens 'use private individual action to counter the rioters: allow individuals to defend their own property' (Floru, 2011).

However, the girls also drew on a moral economy of family loyalty and kinship, 'flesh and blood', to criticise Chelsea Ives' parents:

I didn't know what to think about it, because on one hand she was in the wrong for being a part of the riots and taking stuff, but on the other hand she gave in her own flesh and blood, like...

(Mia)

Yeah, that's the only thing, like...

(Lucia)

And she got six months, I think.

(Kelly)

There's a principle in your family, that's the only reason [I think it's bad]. Like, it's the principle.

(Lucia)

Like it may not have effects on her now, but in the long run, like on her records and things like that, like it's gonna affect her somehow. And in a sense that'll be her mum's fault, in part.

(Shamara)

Mia's evaluation here shows a complex interplay of contradictory and competing moral discourses. Shamara draws on a moral discourse of family loyalty to blame the mother for the long-term effects of a prison sentence and criminal record on her daughter's future, (tentatively) resisting/contesting the neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility.

Moreover, Mia's framing of 'shopping' criminals' as part of the riot clean-up raises important questions about the ways in which the meaning of the riot clean-up has been constructed. It draws on the idea that 'cleaning up' after the riots involves not just the picking up of litter and broken glass but the removal of human detritus from the community (Himmelblau, 2011; Tyler, 2013). The symbolism of sweeping away dirt is a powerful one, and was used in much media coverage (De Castella, 2011; see fig. 2 of a *Daily Express* headline 'sweep scum off our streets'). Himmelblau (2011) has characterised this sweeping as a 'symbolic social cleansing', an idea explored in the following section.

iii) The riot clean-up as ‘social cleansing’?

This section examines the ways in which students negotiated different discourses and moral economies in talking about the riot clean-up. In some ways, the girls’ discussions suggested an embodiment of some of the interlinked and mutually constitutive discourses outlined above. The riot clean-ups were seen as a self-evident good, and the girls drew on discourses of individual responsibility and ‘active’ citizenship. At the same time, however, the students’ use of racialised and classed ‘geographies’ suggested a more nuanced and problematic imagination of community and citizenship at play in the riot clean-up. Moreover, many of the students explicitly criticised the ways in which the media and politicians used divisive and exclusive discourses of community in their portrayals of the riots and the clean-up.

After showing a short news video clip on the clean-up in Clapham Junction (Daily Telegraph, 2011), I asked students about their memories of the riot clean-up, specifically asking who went out to clean up, and why. In terms of motivations, most of the girls said, unsurprisingly, that people got involved in the clean-up ‘mainly just ‘cause they live in that area and they want it to be clean’ (Lucia) and because ‘they didn’t want [their area] to be messed up’ (Shamara). They also suggested the clean-up was motivated by an awareness of the stigma of riots on a neighbourhood and its community:

Because the media was portraying certain areas in such a bad way, they wanted to show, like, everyone in that area’s not the same. Like, even though people are rioting there’s still people who live in that area who will go and clean it up.
(Jade)

I think they were desperate to make themselves feel better. [...] I think they were just trying to get rid of the whole stigma of the riots. They wanted it to just be over, so to make a point to the people who rioted, like, ‘it’s over now and we’re gonna clean it up. We’re gonna move on and go back to normal’.
(Natasha)

As with the riots, many girls resisted the idea that the clean-up was ‘a racial thing’. Indeed, when one student suggested that the ‘typical’ participants in the clean-up were likely to be white, ‘adult’ and middle-class people (and ‘maybe even working-class people and people that aren’t on benefits’, in one girl’s words) other students vehemently rejected this characterisation. For Kelly and Lucia, the media had shaped a certain perception of the clean-up as white and middle-class, excluding young people, ‘ethnic minorities’ and the poor.

I don’t think it’s just rich and poor, ‘cause like with the black and white thing... because, evidently there was a lot of white middle-class people that were going out to clear up, and yeah there was the minority of the other ethnicities – but that’s like with the rich and poor thing, although it was mainly the poorer people that went out to riot, middle class people did still riot. So, like it’s not about black and white, it’s not about rich and poor.
(Shona)

Again, within the context of a discourse that criminalised rioters and celebrated the clean-up, it is understandable that young black students should resist the characterisation of rioters as black. Nevertheless, the ways in which the girls characterised the clean-up in terms of geographical areas suggested a specifically racialised and classed dimension to their imagination of the demographics of rioters and those involved in the clean-up, complicating their assertions that the

riots and clean-up had nothing to do with race and little to do with class. One student, Shona, who is a black student from Peckham, noted that the citizen-led, spontaneous community clean-up only seemed to take place in the 'nicer' parts of London. In Peckham and Brixton, by contrast, the council was left to do the job.

The next day after the riots – I live in Peckham, don't hate – I went out, and everywhere was boarded up already, and like the streets were being swept still, just by like people from the council and not really your average Joe. I didn't really see normal people clearing up.

(Shona)

[...]

It's like the only place people clean-up is in Clapham, that's the only place.

(Lucia)

Like the man said [in the clip], 'the nicer parts of London'... I think, like, in Brixton, I'm not trying to hate on Brixton but I don't think they would clean up, because of the type of people that live there. [...] People in like the nicer bits of London... they may have, like, I dunno, better values than people in the not-so-nice parts of London, so like they've been brought up differently. So they would kind of think to themselves, 'OK, let's go and clean up', although they haven't done it. Whereas other people think 'although it's my area, I haven't made this mess so why should I go and clear it up?'

(Shona)

Though Shona rejected the idea that the riots and clean-up were delineated along lines of race or class, the statement above raises questions about the ways in which cities and neighbourhoods are 'imagined' and talked about (Byrne, 2006). As Byrne points out, geography and space can 'provide a map to living and understanding 'race' and class (Byrne, 2006: 94). The girls seemed to draw on a shared social imagination of the geography of South London and its demographics. While Clapham and Dulwich were by-words for 'nice' areas, Peckham, Brixton and Croydon – where the girls tended to actually live – were the 'not-so-nice' areas. In the popular imagination, Brixton and Peckham are predominantly working-class and 'multicultural' areas of South London (Byrne, 2006), with high levels of poverty (but also rapid gentrification¹¹) and, in the case of Brixton, a famous history of riots. While Clapham and Dulwich seem to function as an allegory for whiteness and middle-class status, Brixton and Peckham are used to connote 'ethnicity', 'rowdiness' and youth.

In many ways, then, the idea that the 'average Joe' would clean up in Clapham, but not in Peckham or Brixton, because of the type of people that live there and their values, suggested an embodiment of the dominant discourse that celebrates the individual, responsible, self-motivated citizen and obscures the structural or systemic inequalities underlying the riots and the meaning of the clean-up. At the same time, however, these deracialised and depoliticised narratives drew on imagined geographies that were racialised and classed.

Moreover, some students were aware and critical of the ways in which these geographies function, and their positioning within them. Shona, as a young black woman from Peckham, suggested that the Clapham residents taking part in the clean-up may have had more self-interested motivations, and may have been 'in it for themselves':

¹¹ See also Peacock, 2014 on the ways in which stigmatising narratives around the riots of 2011 were subsequently used to justify and legitimise further gentrification in areas associated with the unrest.

*If you go to a job interview, and you say you live in a certain area, like if it's a nice area – they shouldn't do this, but they judge you. But then if it's a rubbish area they judge you again. So maybe they just didn't want their area to go down that bad path. So, just to keep their area's name, to keep it posh, so that in the future, when they say they live in Clapham people go 'Oh, Clapham, that's nice'.
(Shona)*

This awareness that those in 'nice' (which, according to the girls' discussions, might be read as 'white and middle-class') areas were keen to keep their area 'nice' by cleaning up after the riots is interesting. This idea raises the question of Himmelblau's (2011) argument that the riot clean-up equated to a symbolic 'social cleansing' of the city by a gentrifying 'broom-wielding bourgeoisie'. This 'social cleansing', Himmelblau argues, was underpinned by a rhetorical division between 'real', 'true' Londoners and, by contrast, those 'inauthentic' Londoners who rioted, establishing

*a discourse that serves primarily to divide those, who in the words of Henri Lefebvre (and later David Harvey), have 'the right to the city' from those who do not, but also from those who can expect to be treated as citizens under the rule of law, and those who are excluded by virtue of their status as non-citizens.
(Himmelblau, 2011)*

Indeed, the girls were critical of the ways in which this discourse had been employed by politicians and the media to delineate citizenship. I asked one group what they thought about David Cameron appearing on television in the wake of the riots, stating that

*this is Britain. This is a great country of good people. Those thugs we saw last week do not represent us, nor do they represent our young people – and they will not drag us down.
(Cameron, 2011b)*

Kelly explicitly rejected this divisive discourse:

*The fact that he was trying to say, like, this is the real London... he was trying to, like, separate the riots not being part of London. But at the end of the day, what happened is a London thing – like, it was all over the news, all around the world. The fact that he still says 'this is real London'... even though he's trying to say the riots isn't part of real London, it is. The fact is, it's going to be there for the rest of our lives. It's part of our history now.
(Kelly)*

The girls in this group argued that an exclusive notion of community was at play in the claim that rioters were not 'real Londoners'. As Les Back argues, community is not simply an objective state of affairs, or even a set of social relations; rather, the concept of community must be seen as a 'moral project', which cannot be understood outside the context of moral and political debates (Back, 2009: 203). 'Community talk' thus provides a vocabulary for moral judgement of social life (Back, 2009).

*the community's meant to be everybody, but it's not everybody in that case.
(Chanel)*

*They sort of class the rioters as... They don't even see them as a community in themselves, they just see them as, like, a gang or a mob of people. The people that cleared up were 'the community', which is kind of hard. Because everybody's supposed to be within the same community, but then there's two different sides, and only the good people are the community, which is how they showed it.
(Natasha)*

Yeah, because in theory the rioters are a community as well, because they're all together doing, like, the same thing, but I don't think he'd refer to them as a community. But he would to the good people who were cleaning up.
(Jade)

The girls' discussions about the riot clean-up suggested complex and sometimes contradictory negotiations of the ways in which it has been portrayed. On the one hand, some girls were keen to state that the clean-up was not delineated by race or class, but by 'values'. They rejected and criticised the idea that rioters should be excluded, rhetorically, from the city or the nation. At the same time, however, this idea of 'values' – closely tied to imagined geographies of South London – was imbued with racialised and classed ideas about 'types of people', echoing the divisive and exclusive 'underclass' rhetoric of the media and Conservative politics (Himmelblau, 2011; Tyler, 2013). While the girls were critical of the ways in which politicians had used the clean-up as an opportunity to 'divide' people, the underlying assumption that the clean-up itself was a positive event was not challenged.

Conclusions and summary

This report has aimed to contribute to the existing literature on the riots, and to address the relative lack of critical literature on the riot clean-up. Focusing on the memories, views and subjectivities of a group of young people situated – geographically and socially – close to the riots, it adds to the significant anthropological literature on the ways in which neoliberal ideals and values are embodied, resisted and negotiated in ethnographic contexts (see for example Coe and Nastasi, 2006; Cahn, 2008).

The research found that depoliticising, individualising and pathologising ideas about the rioters have dominated much media and political rhetoric. Much of the media and political discourse around the riots has been based upon, and contributed to, a particular neoliberal notion of citizenship, whereby citizenship is not a universal right, but rather is ‘earned’ by active, entrepreneurial individuals. The social body is constituted in opposition to an excluded group of ‘failed’ citizens, or non-citizens (Tyler, 2013). The dominant discourse around the riots has framed rioters and their families, and in some cases their communities, as failed citizens. Pathologising discourses of ‘feral’ youths, irresponsible parents and ‘out of control’ communities have obscured the economic and political reasons for the riots, and have served to naturalise and legitimise a punitive response to the riots. In stark contrast, but underpinned by the same narratives, the residents who went out to clean up, both physically and by helping to bring the rioters to ‘justice’, were praised as heroes. These individuals can be seen as the ideal neoliberal citizens: entrepreneurial and ‘self-helping’, relying not on the state but on themselves to clean up – people, as well as dirt – after the irrational, violent outburst of the greedy underclass.

The discussion has shown how these depoliticising, individualising and divisive narratives did, to some extent, flow through the discussions and shape the boundaries of the girls’ moral imagination of the riots. For many of the girls, the riots were unequivocally negative and ‘pointless’, and the girls were unanimous that any sort of damage or theft was to be condemned. As a group of teenagers, these girls have grown up and come of age in a cultural context which has elevated individual responsibility and individual choice, and has framed poverty and marginality as a result of individual failure rather than structural inequality (Harvey, 2005; Tyler, 2013). This has shaped the terms in which events like the riots are talked about, and has determined the scope of acceptable moral attitudes to rioters. Racist discourses have linked the violence and criminality, which supposedly underpin the riots, to ‘black culture’ (see e.g. Barrett, 2011 on historian David Starkey’s controversial Newsnight appearance). In this context, it is entirely understandable that the girls, themselves young, mostly black, and often working-class, were reluctant to frame the riots in terms of class or race, and seemed keen to distance themselves, socially and geographically, from the riots and those who were involved.

At the same time, however, the discussions revealed a degree of complexity that was rarely seen in the media and political rhetoric around the riots, the punishment of rioters, and the clean-ups. The girls often drew on alternative narratives to construct nuanced accounts of the riots and their meaning. Most of the girls acknowledged the underlying structural and social socio-economic inequalities facing young people, and some the limited opportunities young people have to express their frustrations in a way that allows them to be ‘heard’. Most of the

girls agreed that, since the rioters had done something wrong, they should be punished, drawing on the ideas of deterrence and retribution that were prevalent in the media and political rhetoric. However, many of the girls were critical of the idea that the long sentences given to rioters were either an effective deterrent, or a fair punishment. These two challenges drew on broader social ideas of responsibility and morality, in comparison to the simplistic, individualising explanations that were seen in the media. The discussions around the riot clean-up also suggested complex and diverse negotiations of the dominant narratives and discourses.

In many cases, the girls' own experiences and subjectivities problematise the dominant narratives, and add texture and nuance to their accounts of the riots. As young people who were at the heart of much of the negative rhetoric around the riots, the girls were clearly acutely aware of issues of media representation, as well as the socio-economic challenges facing many young people, especially young, black, working-class Londoners. The complexity of their situation was reflected in their navigations of the contested terrain of morality and justice surrounding the riots.

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