**Brexit and psycho-social influences on aggression- I predict a riot?**

Dr Chris Cocking, Senior Lecturer, University of Brighton

E-mail: [c.cocking@brighton.ac.uk](https://owauk.oup.com/owa/redir.aspx?REF=pId-9K_UMYhkcqsvLVmdtyvpYyaB9BN9ZctSVM_9FsJzs102NbrTCAFtYWlsdG86Yy5jb2NraW5nQGJyaWdodG9uLmFjLnVr)

**Introduction:**

The shock waves of the Brexit referendum result are reverberating throughout Europe and beyond, as the consequences of the decision taken by the British electorate on June 24th 2016 begin unfolding. The exact form of a post-Brexit UK is unclear, but there are concerns that there will be a variety of negative implications, and there have already been predictions of increased uncertainty both for the UK[[1]](#footnote-1) and wider global[[2]](#footnote-2) economy. The new Chancellor of the Exchequer (Phillip Hammond) has suggested a reset to the British economy may be necessary in the 2016 Autumn Statement and the aim to achieve a budget surplus by 2020 (set by his predecessor, George Osborne) has already been abandoned[[3]](#footnote-3). However, continued austerity is still possible, with the risk of increased social inequality, and resulting damage to psycho-social and community well-being. Psychologists Against Austerity (2015) have previously argued that increased inequality in the UK over the past 30 years has been linked to reduced levels of social cohesion and involvement in community life, and a post-Brexit economic downturn could exacerbate such inequality, which could in turn increase the risk of social tensions. In this article, I will address the possible psycho-social consequences of Brexit relating to the risks of interpersonal and intergroup aggression. Furthermore, I will illustrate that while there is good reason to fear that such consequences could be harmful for overall social cohesion, it doesn’t mean that they will directly lead to increased civil disorder in the absence of other contextual factors- as has been suggested by some observers.

**Individual aggression:**

There are credible fears of increased inter-group hostility in a post Brexit UK, and there has been a spike in reported xenophobic attacks[[4]](#footnote-4) since the result. In response, Amnesty International UK (2016) recently initiated a campaign to combat the rise in related hate crimes (as they fear prejudiced people may now be emboldened to openly express views that they had previously kept to themselves). This has also led to the new Home Secretary (Amber Rudd), announcing a review of the policing of hate crimes[[5]](#footnote-5) by the body responsible for inspecting the Police (the HMIC[[6]](#footnote-6)). During the referendum campaign itself, the heightened emotions that came with the often impassioned debates led to concerns that interpersonal aggression and violence could increase. These concerns were tragically confirmed when the Labour MP Jo Cox was murdered one week before polling day, with the prime suspect having alleged links to far-right groups[[7]](#footnote-7). In response to this attack, the President of the British Psychological Society (BPS) highlighted the need for society in general to combat the hate-filled rhetoric that could be behind such individual attacks, but also for psychologists to help contribute towards greater understanding of the broader social contexts in which such tragedies could happen, so that they can help combat aggression in society in general (Kinderman, 2016). A recent commentary on the Brexit vote by Maio & Haddock (2016) suggested that socio-economic fear and attitudes towards others can be defining issues in the development of extreme political ideologies (both left and right-wing), and concluded that it is crucial for psychologists to consider immigration in relation to the development of people’s political views- an issue that is believed to have influenced many Leave voters (Chu, 2016). This echoes earlier calls (e.g. Esses et al, 2010) that more work is needed on promoting better understanding of the benefits of migration, and the field of Psychology needs to be involved more in this process. The potential social benefits of such improved understanding are clear, as recent evidence from Social Psychological studies of prejudice reduction (Celeste et al, 2014; Matera et al, 2015) show that greater minority group acculturation can be promoted by enhancing factors that promote more effective integration of majority group members and minority groups (such as immigrants and refugees). This can then lead to improved inter-group attitudes and a consequent reduction in acts of individual aggression towards minority group members- something that is topical and necessary in the light of the rise of reported post-Brexit hate crimes.

**Collective aggression:**

There have also been concerns raised that a post-Brexit Britain could see a rise in collective aggression, and there has already been speculation about the risk of civil disorder after the referendum result. For instance, the pro-Brexit Daily Express newspaper cited a pro-Brexit Tory MP as stating that there could be *‘riots on the streets’* (Maddox, 2016) after talk of a legal challenge to the result.However, such alarmist predictions of civil disorder should be treated with some caution (especially when emanating from those whose stated desire to leave the EU is facing possible challenge). This is because while the social conditions may develop in a post-Brexit Britain whereby civil protest and/or disorder become more likely[[8]](#footnote-8), this doesn’t mean that such disorder is inevitable. Furthermore, assumptions that riots will occur merely because of dissatisfaction with the result of the referendum (by those on either side of the voting divide) reflect simplistic understandings of how riots can begin and spread, and of crowd processes in general. There are recent examples of inaccurate predictions of disorder after previous referenda held in the UK. For instance, the English media wrongly speculated on the possibility of disorder in the aftermath of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, leading to requests from the Scottish Police Service for such speculation to cease (Cocking, 2014a). Finally, there have even been suggestions that hot weather makes riots more likely (Baron & Ransberger, 1978), although such a direct causal link has been disputed as overly simplistic by more recent observations of crowd disorder (Khaleeli, 2016). In short, advance predictions of riots is a risky endeavour that is often proven wrong by later events.

The reason for why such speculation is often inaccurate is that large-scale collective disorder in the UK is comparatively rare, and riots do not happen as often as might be expected if one predicts their occurrence purely through the lens of broad societal discontent. Urban riots are quite complex social phenomena, and when they do occur it is usually because a chain of specific trigger events have occurred within a wider social context that creates a cycle of escalating inter-group hostility. These trigger events (such as the controversial death of a member of the local community at the hands of the Police) can bring people out onto the streets, but riots in these situations are still not certain, and whether or not disorder happens often depends on how such crowd events are managed by the authorities. Numerous studies of urban crowd disorder in the UK (e.g. Cocking 2013; 2014b; Reicher 1996; Reicher et al, 2004; Stott 2009) have argued that the use of indiscriminate public order tactics by the Police (such as ‘kettling’; baton & mounted charges, water cannon etc.) to deal with isolated outbreaks of individual violence can make widespread collective disorder more likely. This is because such indiscriminate tactics by definition cannot differentiate between peaceful or more militant crowd members, and their deployment has the effect of psychologically uniting previously heterogeneous groups of people into a psychological crowd with a shared identity and sense of purpose. This results in increasingly united collective action by crowd members, thus creating an escalating cycle of crowd conflict whereby crowd members respond more militantly to the Police actions, who then reply in turn with increasingly forceful public order tactics.

This is illustrated by exploration of the 2011 riots in England that were triggered by the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham (an inner city London borough with a history of tension between the Police and local community), who was killed in the early afternoon of August 4th. However, the first outbreak of disorder did not begin until late on August 6th (over 48 hours later), and detailed examination of the timeline of events (Cocking, 2014c; Reicher & Stott 2011), suggests that there was a catalogue of errors in how Police liaised with the local community in the aftermath of the shooting. This culminated in a protest outside Tottenham Police station that escalated into a riot as a result of crowd mismanagement, and over the next five days, riots spread across London and other English cities. However, it is also worth remembering that not all English cities suffered rioting (it was worse in the larger conurbations, such as Greater Manchester and Birmingham), and there was no wide-scale disorder in Scottish or Welsh cities (which arguably suffer just as much social deprivation as their English counterparts). Reicher & Stott (2011) also highlighted that in August 2011 there were three main kinds of actions that were undertaken by those involved in the rioting that happened in different London boroughs: a) anti-Police riots where the Police were targeted as they were seen as an illegitimate presence within the local community (in Tottenham and Hackney); b) opportunistic and targeted looting for consumer goods that would not normally be available to those involved in the rioting (in Croydon); and c) indiscriminate attacks on property in wealthy areas that were considered as alien to the rioters (in Ealing). Whether some or all of these behaviours happened in each location depended on specific contextual factors, and they did not happen in all areas. For instance, those involved in opportunistic looting tended to scatter when the Police arrived, and so were less likely to engage in anti-Police rioting (Cocking, 2014b).

Therefore, to assume that riots are more likely per se in a post-Brexit Britain does not take into account the fact that while broader social contexts could create the climate where social deprivation, inequality and even protest are more likely, specific local factors are still crucial in determining whether civil disorder begins and/or spreads. Furthermore, the actual behaviours exhibited in any such rioting will depend on specific local factors, and there is no obvious reason why ‘Brexit rioters’ would necessarily begin looting for consumer goods that they would not otherwise be able to afford (as happened in 2011).

**Conclusion:**

It is easy to feel pessimistic about the general psychological well-being of the UK post-Brexit. The referendum campaign was incredibly divisive, with frequent accusations of misrepresentations (or outright falsehoods) made against both sides of the campaign of the possible consequences of the result[[9]](#footnote-9), and such social divisions may take time to heal. UK society as a whole needs to be vigilant of the risk of increased xenophobia and should work with psychologists to understand the individual and social conditions in which prejudiced attitudes can develop, as well as exploring ways in which hostility towards those perceived as ‘different’ can be reduced. However, it would be rather simplistic to assume that there will inevitably be increased civil disorder on British streets without considering the other possible factors that might trigger such events in the broader social context in which they occur. Furthermore, making inaccurate predictions of disorder, could risk self-fulfilling prophesies, as the Police may feel under pressure to deploy more visible resources in locations where they fear possible disorder, and then respond more robustly to incidents once they occur, which could in turn further exacerbate existing community tensions. Finally, expecting that riots are inevitable could also reduce public surprise when they do happen, which could hamper detailed exploration of their origins, and in turn make it more difficult to understand how to best rebuild community cohesion in their aftermath, as well as reducing the chances of future collective disorder. We all need to work together to ensure that the consequences of Brexit do not further erode British and European social cohesion, and implementing robust evidence from the field of Social Psychology can play a vital part in such attempts to maintain social harmony.

**References:**

Amnesty International UK (2016) *Amnesty launches urgent campaign on racism in the UK amid rise in reported hate crime.* Press Release 28/6/2016. Accessed at <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/amnesty-launches-urgent-campaign-racism-uk-amid-rise-reported-hate-crime> on 28/7/2016

Baron, R. A. & Ransberger, V. M. (1978) Ambient temperature and the occurrence of collective violence: The "Long, hot summer" revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **36,** 351-360.

Celeste, L., Brown, R., Tip, L.K. and Matera, C. (2014) [Acculturation is a two-way street: majority–minority perspectives of outgroup acculturation preferences and the mediating role of multiculturalism and threat.](http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/51505/) *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, **43** (Part B)

Chu, B (2016) Why did people really vote for Brexit? *The Independent*. 26/6/16 Accessed at <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/brexit-eu-referendum-why-did-people-vote-leave-immigration-nhs-a7104071.html> on 25/6/2016

Cocking C. (2013). Crowd flight during collective disorder- a momentary lapse of reason? *Journal of Investigative Psychology & Offender Profiling*, 10,(2) 219-36.

Cocking, C (2014a) *Scottish Referendum disorder- Don’t predict a riot!* Blog post from Don’t Panic! Correcting myths about the crowd, 18/9/2014. Accessed at <http://dontpaniccorrectingmythsaboutthecrowd.blogspot.co.uk/2014/09/scottish-referendum-disorder-dont.html> on 26/7/2016

Cocking, C (2014b) *Dousing disorder or fatally fanning the flames? A study of the possible psychological and physiological effects of water cannon*. Report for the public consultation into the proposed introduction of water cannon by the Mayor of London Office for Policing &Crime (MOPAC). University of Brighton, Feb 2014; Accessed at <https://notowatercannon.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/dousing-disorder-or-fanning-the-flames.pdf> on 27/7/2016

Cocking (2014c) *My thoughts on the Mark Duggan inquest.*  Blog post from Don’t Panic! Correcting myths about the crowd, 9/1/2014. Accessed at <http://dontpaniccorrectingmythsaboutthecrowd.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/my-thoughts-on-mark-duggan-inquest.html> on 26/7/2016

Esses, V.M., Deaux, K., Lalonde, R.N. & Brown, R. (2010) [Psychological Perspectives on Immigration.](http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/13962/) *Journal of Social Issues*, **66** (4), 635-647.

Khaleeli, H. (2016) Is there such a thing as riot weather? *The Guardian,* 20/7/16. On-line edition Accessed at; <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/shortcuts/2016/jul/20/is-there-such-a-thing-as-riot-weather> on 21/7/2016

Kinderman, P. (2016) *We must work together to combat hate*. on-line post, British Psychological Society, 22/6/16. Accessed at <http://www.bps.org.uk/blog/presidential/we-must-work-together-combat-hate> on 25/7/2016

Maddox. D. (2016) Fury over legal bid to BLOCK EU exit: Top lawyers in threat to referendum vote & democracy. *The Daily Express.* 4/7/2016. Accessed at <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/685873/Lawyers-referendum-result-legal-bid-block-Brexit-EU-leave> on 24/7/2016

Maio, G. & Haddock G. (2016) Political Ideology, socio-economic fear and attitudes to immigration. *The Psychologist, 29* (8) p.593 Accessed at <http://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/brexit-poll-part-two> on 25/7/2016.

Matera, C., Stefanile, C. & Brown, R. (2015) [Majority–minority acculturation preferences concordance as an antecedent of attitudes towards immigrants: the mediating role of perceived symbolic threat and meta-stereotypes.](http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/55391/) *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, **45,** 96-103

Psychologists against austerity (2015) *The Psychological impact of austerity: a briefing paper.* Accessed at <https://psychagainstausterity.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/paa-briefing-paper.pdf> on 29/7/2016.

Reicher, S. (1996) ‘The Battle of Westminster’: Developing the social identity model of crowd behaviour in order to explain the initiation and development of collective conflict. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, **26**, 115-34.

Reicher, S., Stott, C., Cronin, P. & Adang, O. (2004). A New Approach to Crowd Psychology and Public Order Policing. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*, **27**, (4), 558–572.

Reicher, S. D. and Stott, C. J. (2011). *Mad Mobs and Englishmen: Myths and Realities of the 2011 ‘riots’.*London: Constable Robinson.

Stott CJ. (2009). 'Crowd psychology and public order policing'. Liverpool, University of Liverpool, UK

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-36864273> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-36877568> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-36864099> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/27/sadiq-khan-muslim-council-britain-warning-of-post-brexit-racism> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36890398> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/17/jo-cox-suspect-thomas-mair-bought-gun-manuals-from-us-neo-nazis-group-claims> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Psychologists against austerity briefing paper- <https://psychagainstausterity.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/paa-briefing-paper.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/tag/eu-referendum> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)