CHAPTER 29

The Relational Meaning-Making of Riots: Narrative Logic and Network Performance of the London "Riots"

Christian Morgner

1 Introduction

There was an almost unanimous reaction by politicians, the media and even social scientists in using the label riot for what happened in early August 2011 in several cities in the UK (see Briggs 2012; Benyon 2012; Gorringe and Rosie 2011; Greenslade 2011a, b; Murji and Neal 2011; *The Guardian*/LSE 2011; NatCen 2011; Angel 2012). The most common narrative when telling the story cites the killing of Mark Duggan as a trigger that sparked violent behavior in deprived areas of London. This included clashes with the police and setting cars and buildings on fire. From here, the violent events (including an enormous amount of looting) spread not only in London but also to other cities in the UK, putting Britain into a state of shock.

The most surprising fact is that virtually no one questioned the use of the term riot and its narrative, nor discussed the inherent (political) meaning and application or addressed the analytical and conceptual qualities of the term riot. This chapter asserts that the use of the label by social scientists in particular channeled their explanation and focus in a specific direction, which provides a limited conceptual comprehension of what happened. In this chapter, the use of the term riot and its highly problematic consequences for social research are addressed from a relational sociology perspective (see Crossley 2016). Such conceptual or theoretical discussions of the term are relatively rare. (There are, of course, an abundance of empirical studies.) This chapter does not present a coherent or fully integrated theory, but it will raise a number of theoretical

C. Morgner (✉)
School of Media, Communication and Sociology, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

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arguments that relate to each other. This wider theoretical and analytical vocabulary will enable riot researchers to unpack greater social complexity. The chapter will put Harrison C. White's conception of networks as narrative or communicative entities at the forefront, using this as the underlying force linking different concepts and empirical observations. The chapter will make use of a range of theoretical terms from such theories and concepts as network, narration, motive talk, attribution, conflict and carnivalism. These theoretical considerations are embedded in empirical material, for instance, statistics, media coverage, secondary analysis of interviews and social media. Overt reductions to simple labels and categories are to be avoided in order to gain a more differentiated and balanced picture. The terms and concepts being developed will pay attention to a range of other secondary concepts used by social scientists, such as the notion of triggers and motives. The chapter will make a strong claim that such events cannot be studied as if they occur outside of social reality, exist somehow apart from it or are even asocial or anti-social; instead it will stress the normality of the way in which this form of social reality unfolds and its particular relational structure and logic. In sum, the chapter will present different ties and strings, which form the narrative called "riot."

2 Established Media Narratives of Riots

There is no doubt that politicians and the media have their own agendas, thus favoring a particular worldview and vocabulary. For instance, political reactions aim at control and security issues, at promising that law and order will be upheld. Media reactions might address negative consequences and repeat them several times (thus increasing the negative image through a sort of negative feedback or loop). They will focus on large numbers, on the outstanding and singular—all of which makes "good" news. Both social spheres are in a position in which they have to provide immediate coverage and, consequently, explanations. The term riot became widely used to explain this notion of the singular and outstanding—people rioted, something they normally do not or should not do—and from here the explanations went into the why and how.

What happened was seen as shocking (common frames of explanation or interpretation could not cope with it), and an immediate need to explain the notion of riots became apparent. A range of social scientists and social researchers offered explanations or even collaborated with the media (*The Guardian*/LSE 2011). It seems that this common sense was not further questioned, and it provided the basis for the majority of the studies conducted in the following year. Although the term riot might have been of use in the media and political arenas, the wider area of social research did not engage in a critical discussion of this label and its consequence for social research. This chapter will address, in principle, three issues of the term riot, which should be regarded more carefully: (1) the political use and history of the label riot; (2) the reductive impact on social reality and subsequent explanations; and (3) the homogenizing effect upon its logic and causes.

Although the term riot might seem to be convincing to those who regarded themselves as not participating, thinking this way causes one to ignore the normative and political consequences of its use. In its normative context, the term riot mainly distinguishes between those who behave, uphold the law and act civilized, and those who cannot control their behavior, are outrageous or are criminals. The term riot thus has a signaling function demarcating the social world into two zones, labeling the damage-doing gathering, which is disapproved of, and using terms like *protest* or *demonstration* for similar events that are approved. Moreover, this political zoning of behavior is constructed as if it were an understanding shared by all members of society. However, as Charles Tilly (2003: 18–19) has shown: "In cataloguing thousands of violent events—many of them called riots (or the local-language equivalent) by authorities and observers—from multiple countries of several centuries, I have not once found an instance in which the participants called the event a riot or identified themselves as rioters." Furthermore, such labels are bound to change in the later chapters of history. The US government and many social scientists labeled the anti-Vietnam and anti-racist movements in the United States in the 1960s in terms of riots and rioters. Nowadays, such characterizations seem awkward; those involved in such movements have rather entered into the heroic chapters of history, and their politicians have fallen into disgrace. Thus, an explanation of what happened in London and elsewhere in the UK during August 2011 might consider a more relational constitution of this term.

The label riot also has a profound effect upon wider social relations—who takes part, and who is "apart." For instance, the former encompass those who were violent, looted shops and engaged in other criminal activities while the rest did not. However, such a perspective ignores the fact that society cannot be sliced into different pieces. The police, statements by politicians, the media coverage and even the very people who followed the events on their TVs were, from the perspective of relational sociology, constitutive features through which meaning was established. The constitution of meaning must be seen as part of a complex network of different narratives based in societal reality and not apart from it. However, the label riot suggested that the meaning of the events derived purely from the activities of those perceived as rioting. (Tilly showed that these people consider themselves otherwise, although the construction of meaning is hardly in the hands of the rioters alone.) This also had serious consequences for the type of explanation that followed, which aimed to base the riot in the motives of those who participated as rioters. Questions arose as to why people participated in the riots and what caused their behavior to change. These causal or linear types of explanations can be grouped into three general types: sociodemographic explanations, normative or value-based explanations and political explanations (see Birch and Allen 2012: 33).

The sociodemographic explanation tends to collate various statistics on the prevailing economic conditions, namely, levels of deprivation and rising inequality, in particular in light of the spending cuts of the government's deficit-reduction program. The second type speaks of a moral and normative decline

but also of failed social integration and low education. The third type links the riots and recent elite scandals, essentially providing ammunition to those who felt that they did not get their share of these profits. A variant of this type linked the riots with a general mistrust of the police, caused by new forms of policing. However, all of these approaches have two difficulties: (1) they cannot explain why these motives led to a series of very specific actions on this particular day and time[1]; and (2) the empirical evidence (mostly of a quantitative nature) does not explain why other regions with similar features did not experience the same actions (for an overview of this critique, see McPhail 1994).

The notion of riot subsequently suggests that the people who were part of the riots were all rioters, engaging more or less in the same activities. An extreme version of this suggests that all were looting, burning down houses and fighting with the police, relying more or less on the same motivational resources. This picture suggests that there is virtually no difference between individual action and collective action. Furthermore, this notion makes reference to theories of mass psychology and crowd theory, where the individuality and diversity of social activities is suppressed by the event—in other words, people are acting without thinking. McPhail and Wohlstein's (1983) research (mostly through video analysis) confirms that there are numerous different activities taking place during these events, with very often only a minor group behaving violently. Nevertheless, this aspect of the notion "riot" led to very general and abstract questions: Why did the riots happen? Or, why did people riot? These questions try to explain the diverse behavior of several thousand people through cause-and-effect explanations. Furthermore, the internal logic of such social occurrences, the details of how such events unfold, the cascades of social behavior and the reinforcing feedback are virtually ignored.

The aforementioned discussion of the term riot revealed that it works as an epistemological obstacle (Bachelard 1994). Beside its normative and political connotations, it channels the scientific discourse into a particular direction and logic, blocking a more complex and differentiated approach. Consequently, the second part of this chapter carves out a different analytical vocabulary that uses ideas as developed in relational sociology in combination with a reinterpretation of existing empirical material.

3 Relational Networks and Meaning-Making

The following will outline a different theoretical vocabulary that is more capable of understanding the relational formation of social meaning, which cannot simply be attributed to the intentions and motives of certain people. The chapter will suggest that the label riot is but one part of an overall narrative, which is created in a complex network of different narratives, stories or communicative exchanges.[2] Such an idea of a communicative network has been proposed by Harrison C. White. Although the events were labeled as anarchic, disorder or unrest means that a procession of meaning was possible, although these labels declared that the events seemed to have no order. Thus, if the events did not

lead to a chaotic assemblage of meaning, how could the different activities have been linked up and therefore integrated into an overall narrative and procession of meaning? White suggests that such linkages emerged from "interacting control struggles" (1992: 150). This means that the elements (activities, events, reports and utterances) of a network evolve through a form of mutual co-production.[3] The basic idea is that the creation of meaning prompts efforts to embed the meaning or relate it to other events; subsequently, the creation of meaning has to reckon with such counter-meanings (White speaks here of forms of control and counter-control of meaning).[4] In other words, the network describes complex coordination efforts with regard to the elements of a network through other elements of the same network. "Identities come to perceive the likelihood of impacts to other identities in some string of ties and stories. The social result is called a network" (White 1992: 65). Thus, the network is not based along a line similar to the pearls on a chain or classic notions of the network, but "[e]ach control effort presupposes and works in terms of other identities" (White 1992: 6). In this sense, the heterogeneous elements of a network—media reports, the officials' statements, conflicts between police and those involved, and reactions of the general public—create a stable narrative (communicative network) when the meaning or identity of each element (reports, acts, statements and reactions) anticipates and responds (indirectly or directly) to other elements of the network. Such an approach will not only have to deal with the physical violence and looting, but also with the accounts of politicians, and the reactions of the general public and, in particular, the media (accounts stressing such an internal dynamic are quite rare, see Firestone 1972).

4 "Once Upon a Time": The Narrative Construction of the Beginning

It seems by now to be a firmly established narrative that the shooting and killing of Mark Duggan was the initiating moment of the so-called London riots (see Briggs 2012: 30). The idea of the "trigger" is, however, problematic in two ways: (1) it does not compare the event to other similar events that did not have the same effect; and (2) it somehow ignores the temporal gap between the shooting on August 4 and violent events that occurred not before August 6. A person's death is no doubt a tragic and very emotional moment for many people. Individual deaths are unfortunately a reoccurring event for the British (England and Wales) and Metropolitan Police. Since the 1990s, almost 1500 people have died after coming into "contact" with the police (England and Wales) (see Inquest 2012). Twenty-one people died in shootings within the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Police, which is about one person per year for the last twenty years. The highest number was in 2007, when three people were shot. Although a considerable number of people have died in contact with the police (England and Wales), virtually none of these deaths have triggered large-scale events.[5]

Several accounts have stated that the shooting of Mark Duggan was the immediate spark—that the riots were an immediate reaction to this event (it served as a trigger or catalyst) (see Waddington 2012). The language of the immediate, of the trigger or catalyst, suggests a near instant, causal reaction in the form of violent behavior. However, these actions did not occur within an immediate time frame, but two days later. Very little research has addressed what happened within those two days. It seems that the communication of what had happened caused a great deal of confusion. The event was reported and dealt with by multiple sources. There were statements issued by the police, media reports, and a discussion of the event on social media and other local networks. Social media (Facebook) picked up on the event after a few minutes (Briggs 2012) and was used to disseminate additional reports and to distribute images, which then fostered private interactions about the incident. Media reports joined this diffusion of information, adding further pictures and opinions, in addition to the statements issued by the police. The social networks had great difficulty drawing conclusions about the event's meaning because of the inconsistent reports, differing opinions and confusion within the police in dealing with the incident appropriately. Specifically, the police did not immediately inform Mark Duggan's parents of his shooting (see Reicher and Stott 2011, Chap. 4). Donati (2012: 194) describes such interactions of intermediaries as part of the relational meaning-making process. According to White, Godart and Thiemann (2013), the meaning-making would not lead to the creation of a commonly accepted framework in this case, but would instead increase the uncertainty regarding the event's meaning, and subsequent social relations. White, Godart and Thiemann also argued that such increased uncertainty can create turning points. The field of possibilities expanded, creating opportunities to modify established strategies.

Thus, subsequent development of the event happened on a Saturday (when people were not at work or were involved in other social activities), and a reduction of uncertainty became available through joining a network of like-minded people (see Hogg and Mullin 1999). The mutual co-presence of other people reinforced itself, and this group of several hundred people marched to a police station in Tottenham, London. However, the communication between the group and the police did not lead (for whatever reason) to a mutually supported agreement that would have reduced uncertainty; instead, the different facts, interpretations and behavior formed a communicative contradiction, which became an antagonism. If communication has condensed such contradictions, it is very likely that they will be attributed as being deliberate, for instance, having something to hide or not regarding one communication partner as worthy of being informed (see Luhmann 1995: 389). Such a picture is then easily reinforced in a group, and antagonism becomes the topic itself. At this point, the uncertainty of the situation is reduced through a form of social regression (see Slater 1963). Multiple sources and directions or other social contingencies are reduced to a communication between only two partners, in this case, the police against the group of "protesters."

Georg Simmel (1964: 14) draws attention to this relational co-constitution, where both sides have something in common: that of working against each other, in a form of shared antagonism. Both sides are now linked in a network of mutual co-production. At this point, a type of parasitic social structure emerges (Luhmann 1995: 389). The catalyst of that structure is negative contingency: "I will not do what you want if you do not do what I want" (Luhmann 1995: 389). This structure nourishes itself through a communication of rejecting the communication of others, in which one can observe what will harm the other side because one assumes that the other side observes what will harm it. It is from this perspective that actions are drawn together; however, they may be heterogeneous because in such a situation, "everyone can actualize all possibilities that disadvantage others" (Luhmann 1995: 390), and a conflict between two parties is ongoing. The logic of "us versus them" is employed by both sides and thereby reduces the uncertainty of social relations. For instance, the group repeatedly shouted: "We want answers." "We want justice." "We have been given no answers" (see Good 2011).

It is difficult to explain such spirals of growing antagonism through structural theories of conflict or violence because they cannot grasp the great variety of actions and why they occur in particular situations. Relational sociology in combination with attribution theory fills this gap, as it investigates how people give meaning to human behavior.[6] Meaning is constructed through direct or indirect observation (through the report of others) of a behavior, which is interpreted as deliberate, goal-orientated, or as a result of reflex, accident or habit. Finally, an imputation of the causes of the behavior is made, which usually takes two forms: the behavior's causes are attributed to the environment or to the situation/person (see Hotaling 1980: 138). For the notion of aggression and violence, the imputation of intention is crucial, leading to the question of how the situation at the police station facilitated an attribution of malevolent intent.

The attribution very much depends on the meaningful rules that are present in the given social setting. These rules present a threshold through which malevolent intent can be imputed. The given situation is that of the police and the general public. For the general public, two rules were important in the situation: (1) the expected claims, such as justice and the right to be informed; and (2) that the police behaved within their legitimate means (see Westley 1966). The police are concerned about their asymmetrical relationship with the general public: (1) they are the authority that can use force; and (2) they demand cooperation to maintain law and order (see Westley 1953). If a violation of such rules becomes apparent, the behavior is very likely to be seen as intentionally malevolent. This leads to the question of why the police and not environmental factors are put into the foreground. First, if the police's behavior is questioned, its mediating role as a third party is undermined. If the police violate the rules, there is, in principle, no other police the public can turn to for help. Second, the general public perceives the police as treating people of a particular ethnic group unlawfully. In the London riot situation, whether this

was intended by the police or not, a number of issues facilitated such an attribution: it took a very long time before the police reacted. There was not much communication between the two groups, thus the public experienced long bouts of silence on the part of the police. Further, the demands were not met in the sense of talking to the police officer who had the authority to speak openly and lawfully about the case. Thus, the police appeared to be hiding something. The silence was regarded as intentional and was met with even stronger claims (the group began to shout). Information about the event was also spread via social media (there was a considerable increase in Twitter messages; see Tonkin et al. 2012; Bennett 2011; Burn-Murdoch et al. 2011). Thus, more and more people appeared at the scene. Furthermore, rule violations such as being uncooperative or making use of non-legitimate force became likely motives imputed by the police. Only when this relational set-up emerges does a vocabulary of motives which is more overtly aggressive or violent in its direction arise (see MacIver 1940):

> Overt aggression occurs with substantial frequency only when people are threatened in a conflict situation and observe a model successfully aggressing against the source of threat, the other party in the conflict. (Pitcher et al. 1978: 25)

In consequence, the situation leads to a point where any behavior is framed in a way through which a vocabulary of motives can appear, through which the behavior is seen as violent, sparking further violence against those attributed as rule violators, that is, the dispersing of the crowd through "normal" police tactics or the burning of police cars (see Manning 1980). In particular, activities regarded as an illegitimate and intentional use of physical violence function as a threshold symbol: "But then it kicked off, people got angry because of the girl—police hit her or something … this pushed them over the top" (NatCen 2011: 15).

Here, the logic of counter-violence unfolds and leads to an upward-spiraling effect of using more violence (riot police, police on horseback, and the crowd throwing rocks, bottles and bricks). One could speak of threshold cascades (see Granovetter 1978). However, it would be wrong to frame all further activities within the narrative of physical violence. Physical violence only represents a minor portion of the events—it is a symbolic threshold, which is only broken in the most threatening circumstances (see Fig. 29.1). The majority of the violence was not directed against other people, but against commercial premises and vehicles.

Mark Duggan's death, or violent clashes with the police in general, overlooks the fact that the relational set-up and its embedding into a larger communication network led to an increasing uncertainty about what had happened and how the conflicting messages could be interpreted. Social relationships also became more uncertain, due to interpretations and conflicting statements within various social networks. This increased uncertainty had a cascade effect, which led to new strategies aimed at managing it; for instance, collective information

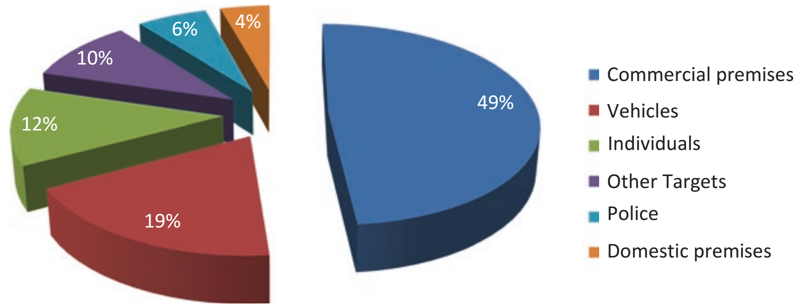

Fig. 29.1 Recorded crimes related to the events by target/victim
Source: Home Office, October 2011, n = 5326

sharing among like-minded people. However, these measures only increased the uncertainty elsewhere (police or media), which escalated the uncertainty into antagonism and finally (violent) conflict. This relational explanation demonstrates why such high levels of uncertainty are relatively improbable. It also shows that the failure to cope with rising uncertainty can create new uncertainty thresholds, which increase the likelihood of a major turning point.

5 Notion of the Outstanding: The Construction of Media Meaning

Quite a large number of people were informed about the development via social media or through the use of text messages. Additionally, the media started to pick up on the topic. This diffusion of information embedded the developments into a much larger social world (see Baker 2012). Furthermore, the use of social media and the coverage by the mass media had a reinforcing quality. If something is widely reported, it has to be important, so more people will follow the events and attend them in person, thus making the event itself even larger, bringing again more attention to it. The logic of an increasing singularity of a possible major conflict develops. This outstanding quality is again enhanced by a particular logic of the media itself, for instance, the focus on pictures (Internet, newspapers and television), the highlighting of something seen as negative or deviant as a source for news and the attraction of something big, namely large-scale conflicts (for more details on these news factors, see Staab 1990). Although the role of the media has been noticed by various authors as a crucial factor in spreading events and diffusing information about them (see Singer 1970; Myers 2000; Russell 2007), this research has overlooked the self-referential quality in the construction of meaning or narrative with regard to these events (Morgner 2010). The reason for this can be seen in a conservative understanding of the media, which is mostly informed by the sender–receiver model of the early days of mass communication studies.

The media appear to be reporting *about* the events; they are an input/output system in which information about something on the outside is noticed and selected and then distributed to others. However, this ignores the fact that media outlets are not neutral sources that simply mirror the world, but that the images by the media, which are informed by particular criteria of newsworthiness, frame the event (see Snow et al. 2007). They give it meaning, which is then picked up by its audience, leading to subsequent reactions that work along this frame (using a language of the outstanding or surprising or singular), thereby reinforcing the frame and enhancing the narrative of the media, which leads to another narrative of reactions *ad infinitum*. Media meaning-making is therefore best described through a relational approach of interlinking cascades of news messages. The early media reports on August 6 focused on three images in particular (most of the images were redistributed through social media): the burning of two police cars and a double-decker bus and a fire that destroyed the Carpetright building. These pictures were repeated across the different channels and media, shown from various angles and embedded into a general coverage as sort of a peak point or particular highlight. Thus, an image of the whole of Tottenham/London being in an uproar emerged, comparing the events to the bombing during the Second World War: "London and the Blitz" (see Reicher and Stott 2011). A frame of the extraordinary was established, uniting the different actions under the label of the riot and as something that deviated from the ordinary.[7] Other channels interrupted their scheduled programming, with the interruption reinforcing the notion of the extraordinary: "television's most powerful gesture consists precisely in interrupting the continuous flow of its programs" (Dayan and Katz 1998: 162).

As a consequence, the extraordinary circumstances caused even more people to flock to the area, which in consequence confirmed the narrative (because an extraordinarily large number of people were present) (for more on large numbers and media, see Staab 1990). This notion of the extraordinary was also picked up by a range of commentators, who explained that those attracted by the events were mostly criminals (or ordinary citizens who were lured to the events through sheer emotional amazement). Such claims received further support from the statistical data of those taken to court. In the case of London (the latest data chart from the Ministry of Justice is from September 13, 2012), the majority of the persons had previous offenses (see Table 29.1).

The numbers in Table 29.1 seem to verify that the majority of those participating in the events had a criminal record, leading to the conclusion that the circumstances mostly attracted these people. Although one cannot really argue with the data, when comparing this data with the general crime statistics in London in the twelve previous months, the overall explanation is quite flawed (see Table 29.2).

The outstanding fact in this table is that nothing stands out. The overall assessment of criminal histories is virtually the same year round. Thus, if the event was especially attractive to so-called criminals, their percentage must have been considerably higher than the average. For example, the category of "more

Table 29.1 Criminal histories of suspects involved in public disorder between August 6 and 9, 2011

Previous offenses	*Percentages and numbers of offenders*
None	22.3
1	12.3
2	8.7
3–5	16.6
6–10	14.5
11–14	5.8
15–49	16.4
50 or more	3.4
Total number of offenders (100%)	2021

Data Source: Ministry of Justice, Statistical Bulletin, September 13, 2012

Table 29.2 Criminal histories of all offenders who received a reprimand, warning, caution or sentence for an indictable offense in the twelve months leading to the end of March 2011 in London

Previous offenses	*Percentages and numbers of offenders*
None	27.8
1	10.4
2	7
3–5	13
6–10	11.8
11–14	5.7
15–49	17.3
50 or more	6.9
Total number of offenders (100%)	76,136

Data Source: Ministry of Justice, Statistical Bulletin, September 13, 2012

than 15 previous offenses" must have been significantly higher. Additionally, the data does not support the luring thesis of ordinary citizens being attracted by such circumstances. The outstanding fact is that, with regard to their criminal histories, the majority of people participating in the event did not differ qualitatively, but only quantitatively. This leads to two questions: Why was the situation constructed as "normal," and why did the event vary in terms of its quantitative extent, that is, the numbers of people participating?

The second part of the question is usually answered through socioeconomic categories, such as youth, race and educational level, through which relevant motives are imputed and very often stereotyped (McPhail 1971: 1069):

> There is no compelling reason to accept the inference that persons are more impetuous because of their youth, more daring because of their gender, more disenchanted because of their race, or less rational because of their educational level. An equally plausible interpretation of these data is that such persons are

> simply more available for participation by virtue of the large amount of unscheduled or uncommitted time which results from being young, black, male and without educational credentials in the urban ghettos of contemporary U.S. society.

This view is supported by a range of other studies (see Moinat et al. 1972; Miller et al. 1977; Ladner et al. 1981; NatCen 2011: 34). They show that variables such as time and access to the location are a far better explanation of behavior than socioeconomic explanations. The first activities in London emerged on a Saturday evening, which further extended availability; also, London's public transport offered cheap and quick access to most locations.[8] Another mechanism was also of great importance: people joined or "helped" what they considered their peers or in-group members due to a situation of reversed social order. This leads to the first part of the aforementioned question: Why did the situation appear normal, even though the media gave it the notion of being outstanding?

6 The Normality of the Social Ruptures: The Relational Construction of the Reversed Order

That people act upon an assumed understanding of one another as being ordinary or "normal" receives special attention in the work of Harvey Sacks (1992: 218):

> There's a business of being an "ordinary person," and that business includes attending the world, yourself, others, objects so as to see how it is that it is a usual scene. And when offering what transpired, you present it in its usual "nothing much" fashion, with whatever variants of banal characterizations you might happen to use.

The analysis thus has to elaborate on the issue of what kinds of normalities (including kinds of deviance) are produced through the narrative of the network and within the accounts in the particular setting of the so-called London "riots"?[9]

The events in London were reported as a sort of social rupture, which is marked by a temporary interruption of the continuous flow of social activities—something occurs that stands out of the ordinary. Pierre Bourdieu speaks of moments in which the meaning of the ordinary is turned upside down (Bourdieu 1990: 159). This idea is also explored by Mikhail Bakhtin (1993).[10] Carnivalism refers to a narrative of suspension and/or reversal of the rules and regulations of ordinary life. Bakhtin demonstrates that this state leads not to chaos but to a temporal order on which social reality is made contingent (see White et al. 2013). Common ideas and truths are endlessly tested and contested—they appear in relativity to all things and claim to voice alternative choices.[11] The world being in an upside-down state means that other norms and values will replace the status quo for a short time. Struggling with the

police, being in conflict with others—a range of activities regarded as criminal—are, for the abovementioned people, not extraordinary circumstances, but represent their "normality" to a certain extent (see Osvaldsson 2004; for the normality of the locations, see Till 2012): "Normally the police control us. But the law was obeying us, know what I mean?" (*The Guardian*/LSE 2011: 23).

The reversed order and its normality was crucial with regard to three developments that stress a relational set-up: (1) the asymmetrical relationship with the police (the experience of strict policing and the possibility of reversing that order served as a catalyst in making the violence a collective phenomenon); (2) an interlinking of different meanings describing the events through a language of the lawless, unrestricted, unrest, anarchy and so forth (see Greenslade 2011a, b) that redefined the notion of property; and (3) the reversed order constituted a new "audience" for the event, who engaged the circumstances through a highly moral language of good/bad behavior.

A considerable amount of research has demonstrated that partisanship or frame alignment depends on the superior status of one side and the social closeness of the other (Arms and Russell 1997; Roche 2001; Snow et al. 1986). This implies that a third party will not be neutral if the person involved in the conflict is regarded as an in-group member, as a like-minded person (detests the police), as part of the same social relations (see Roche 2001),[12] and if such a third party is in conflict with a group that shares an asymmetrical relationship. In such a setting, a collectivization of violence is then possible due to a strong partisanship, where solidarity emerges to support one group against the other because the members are socially close and at the same time distant from the other. The adversary status of the other is thereby influenced due to its superior status (see Manning 1980; Hotaling 1980; Roche 2001). Studies published in the aftermath of the events have demonstrated that the policing practice contributed to such a notion of being socially close (the police violate the rights of these people),[13] enlarging the distance with the police, who use their superior status to implement such a violation (see *The Guardian*/LSE 2011: 19). The partisanship also becomes possible through the use of the BlackBerry Messenger service (*The Guardian*/LSE 2011: 30). This violation was implemented via dense coverage by the media about the event and through personal networks. In consequence, these structures were crucial in diffusing and spreading the activities. That people were part of these wider networks—and were socially integrated and informed—meant they could be mobilized more quickly than large numbers of isolated or excluded people (Bohstedt 1994: 269). Further, those being informed could "copy" the activities of other areas (Bohstedt 1994: 281)[14]:

> [F]ew young people got involved in the riots on their own. Most went along with friends and both influenced and were influenced by their peers in terms of how far they went in their involvement. (NatCen 2011: 6)

7 Narratives of Redefinition and the Communication of Moral Judgments

The majority of the offenders brought to trial were not prosecuted for violence against any given person, but instead for looting or looting-related activities (for an overview on the term looting, see Ginty 2004). As Bakhtin (1993), Bourdieu (1990), Rosenfeld (1997), and White, Godart and Thiemann (2013) have noted, the reversal of the social, in a sort of carnival spirit, opens up new possibilities:

> The breaking with ordinary experience of time as simple re-enactment of a past or a future inscribed in the past, all things become possible (at least apparently), when future prospects appear really contingent, future events really indeterminate … [their] consequences unpredicted and unpredictable. (Bourdieu 1990: 182)

This is an important narrative, which is reflected in a broad range of semantics depicting the situation of the looting, for instance: "It was like Christmas," or "This was more of a party," or being a "feast" or a "spectacle" or a "festival" (see Topping and Bawdon 2011; *The Guardian*/LSE 2011: 20 and 28; NatCen 2011: 21).

In such a setting, the narrative leads to a redefinition of property rights (see Dynes and Quarantelli 1968, 1970; Varul 2011; *The Guardian*/LSE 2011: 28):

> "People were picking up things like it was in their homes and it was theirs already," "Get stuff for free," "Get anything you want, anything you ever desired," "It would have been like a normal shopping day … but with no staff in the shop."[15]

The issue of ownership is questioned, very often in the form of a conflict over who can own what.[16]

This is strongly reflected in the selectiveness of the stores being looted (see Fig. 29.2). Of the stores being targeted, more than 60 per cent were retail stores. Within this category, the most common were electrical and clothing stores (see Fig. 29.3). This data reflects that general stores representing mostly

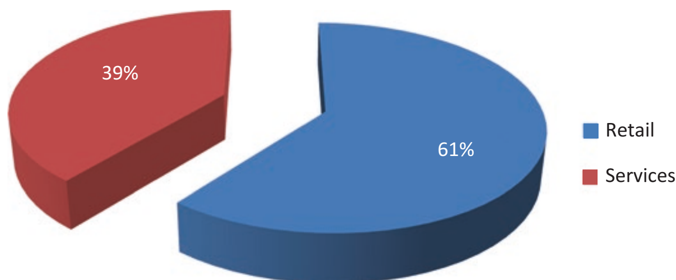

Fig. 29.2 Types of commercial premises targeted in the events
Source: Home Office, October 2011, $n = 2278$

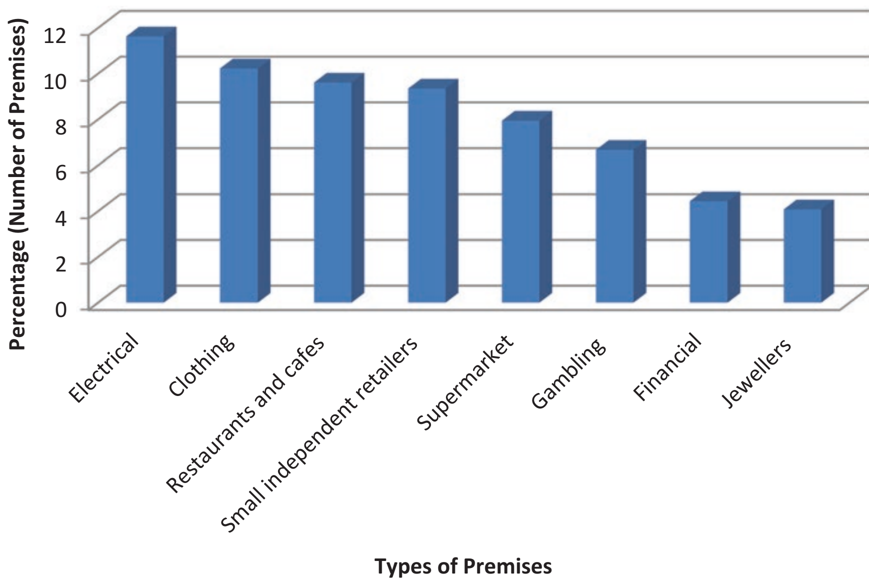

Fig. 29.3 Types of commercial premises targeted in the events (detailed version) Source: Home, Office, October 2011, n = 1457 (the list excludes general categories such as "other premises" and percentages smaller than 4%)

goods of symbolic value or status were targeted; so-called lifestyle goods such as big flat-screen TVs or mobile phones made up the overwhelming majority of the products looted. For example, banks, utility stations, industrial plants, private residences and schools were largely ignored. The apartments and homes that were damaged were in or near burned business establishments.

With the establishment of such a reversed and highly selective order, another party emerges in the conflict that in principle makes use of moral judgments of good and bad behavior. For instance, David Cameron (2011) called the riots "mindless selfishness." Joe Anderson (cited in Bartlett 2011), a member of Liverpool's council, called the participants "mindless thugs," and the *Daily Mirror* (2011) classified the occurrences as "mindless rioting," or, using more drastic language, described the "'scum' who need to be swept from the street" or "the looters who should be shot" (Henley 2011). Through such moral judgments, a new description or communicative tie in the network is offered, creating a sort of subhuman person driven by greed and anger. Thus, another group is formed to take part in the conflict because such judgments rearrange the linking of the elements and therefore the procession of meaning in the network. Taking part in the network legitimized the talk about drastic means, sending in the army, or using rubber bullets or water cannons. There is no doubt that, because of this language, some people were afraid to continue the looting, but the abrupt ending suggests that the narrative of the reversed order

consumed itself. As Bourdieu (1990: 193) outlined, it is the ordering, the beginning grip of the normality of the event, that consumes the spontaneous energy. The behavior becomes predictable, the contingency of *the against* changes into a repetition of the same, and suddenly the potential of pumping even more negative contingency into social reality decays. The order is restored, at least temporarily.

8 Summary

This chapter criticized the unquestioned use of the term *riot*, with its normative and political implications, from the perspective of relational sociology.

First, this perspective demonstrated that the implicit narrative as embedded in the term riot channeled the research in a particular and limiting direction, such as having a reductive impact on explaining the social reality (focusing only on activities like looting and violence) of the events, and on its subsequent explanations (addressing the hidden motives of a mostly socioeconomic nature). Furthermore, the term riot preferred linear and strictly causal explanations by focusing on the hidden and suppressed causes of riots and these causes being released through a particular trigger.

Second, relational sociology could challenge common descriptions of the "trigger" or "initiating moment" by providing a close reading of the cascading stages of increasing uncertainty through which an antagonism, a conflict and finally collective violence evolved. The analysis of the management of uncertainty could demonstrate that patterns of attribution are crucial factors through which a violation of rules can become possible, which again has serious consequences for subsequent reactions.

Third, such developments were not a local phenomenon, but were already embedded in a wider social network through social media, personal relations and the mass media. Through the inclusion of all these narratives into a wider network of social relations, new links could be forged and activities could unfold through connecting themselves to this network. This reconfigured the meaning of the network and thus enabled other links to be integrated. Such important linkages were facilitated by the media, which provided a description of a world turned upside down.

Fourth, in this context a carnival atmosphere emerged—what was considered as deviant became normal. In this normality, a range of other activities could be acted out: motives that enabled such behavior became possible in the everyday. Social media, the mass media and personal networks could mobilize other people to take part, enlarging the idea of the event and making it even more attractive for the media. In such a setting, the redefinition of property becomes possible as a sort of normality, in which shopping without paying at the counter is acceptable. However, the looting did not occur on a random basis. The upside-down order is not simply an alternative, but provides an alternative to obtain what is considered to be of symbolic value in the everyday, here very much related to questions of identity and status. The narrative of the

reversed order induces a narrative of moral communication, mainly in the form of describing the reversed order as morally bad and thus legitimizing a language that is even more drastic.

This chapter criticized the unproblematic view of the term riot and provided different conceptual considerations through which new viewpoints regarding the study and understanding of the events can be conducted. These viewpoints stand apart from the current account of the deviant, the criminal or the mindless, but emphasize the relational constitution of such events.

Notes

1. Very often, motivational explanations use the idea of the trigger, through which these deep desires and motives are unblocked. This idea of the trigger will be discussed in the second part of the chapter.
2. This chapter makes use of the term narrative or relational network but acknowledges that a number of related concepts exist, for instance, the terms "conversational order" (see Harvey Sacks 1992) or self-referential communication (see Niklas Luhmann 1995).
3. "Network" does not refer to an observation of linkages between people, meaning that it does not refer to an observation as an outside category, for instance, as a sort of coverage about the riots.
4. "Control is both anticipation of and response to eruptions in environing process" (White 1992: 9).
5. It is also not possible to argue that the shooting of Mark Duggan was the straw that broke the camel's back because the overall number of people dying after contact with the police has sharply declined during the last ten years. In 2010 and 2011, these numbers were the lowest they had been for the previous twenty years (see Inquest 2012).
6. Attribution theory can be seen as a particular case of processing meaning in the form of a question/answer network (motive talk).
7. This notion of the extraordinary, therefore, also related to the audience at home who followed these events on television. The message of the extraordinary was directed at them and confirmed by capturing their attention. Although the television audience did not physically participate in the events, viewing was part of a meaning-making network, and they therefore took part in the process.
8. Most of the studies with a socioeconomic orientation were unable to explain why areas sharing similar features such as youth, ethnicity and educational level were untouched by the activities, in particular East London (Poplar), or why areas of relative wealth (South and West London) were part of it.
9. This interactive or conversational approach is supported by McPhail and Wohlstein's 1983 research, which demonstrates that most people do not attend such gatherings alone, but as part of a group of friends and associates.
10. Another very common theory describes this as social liminality (see Waddington 2012: 11).
11. Bakhtin and others (see Surhone et al. 2010) mainly addressed forms of carnivalism involving humor and jolly relativity and applied this to social movements, which use tactical frivolity as a form of public disorder.

12. Forms of self-categorization are crucial here, as they highlight an important difference between those who become involved and those who remain bystanders (see Levine et al. 2002).
13. The study "Reading the Riots" (*The Guardian*/LSE 2011: 18) reports that 85% of those involved identified policing as an important factor (see also Klein 2012).
14. The looting and violence spread mostly into the north-west section of London, which is well-connected historically, as well as in terms of the media, transportation and personal networks. This thereby excludes Wales and Scotland or regions further north that no doubt have areas of similar socioeconomic conditions but did not become involved (see Baudains et al. 2012).
15. *The Guardian*/LSE study (2011: 5) arrived at similar results: "Many rioters conceded their involvement in looting was simply down to opportunism, saying that a perceived suspension of normal rules presented them with an opportunity to acquire goods and luxury items they could not ordinarily afford. They often described the riots as a chance to obtain 'free stuff.'"
16. It is very likely that the looting was spurred on and later became a widespread phenomenon through the local presence of gangs, which exploited the situation more from need for profit or status (see Harding 2012a, b).

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Christian Morgner's research addresses the creation, transformation, and transmission of meaning. Going beyond more traditional conceptions of meaning as a cognitive quality or object, he considers meaning as the continuous request to create specific shapes, which acquire meaning only in light of other meaningful possibilities. Exploring meaning-making from the perspectives of culture, communication, and globality, his research has taken three main directions. The first of these strands explores diffusion and localization of mediated meaning in global events (terrorist attacks, natural catastrophes, and media events). A second strand explores meaning-making in situations of high uncertainty—for instance, communication breakdowns and high-risk situations. Finally, a third strand looks at the invention and transformation of meaning in creative and artistic practices. Morgner has held research positions and visiting fellowships at the University of Cambridge, Yale University, Hitotsubashi University (Toyko), University of Leuven, and the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris). His current projects relate to globalization of the arts, risk communication and cultural diversity, and disaster prevention in the Global South.