

Reflections on ‘Reading’ the Riots from an Early-Career Perspective: Listening, Storytelling and Third-Space Subjectivities

LAURIE PARSONS (University of Leicester). Email: lbp6@leicester.ac.uk.
ORCID: [0000-0003-0366-7743](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0366-7743).

CHARLOTTE BROOKS (University of Leicester). Email: cpb26@leicester.ac.uk.
ORCID: [0000-0003-0812-5556](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0812-5556).

Abstract

In this short article, we offer some ‘work in progress’ reflections about the role and identities of academics in ‘reading the riots’ that occurred in England and Northern Ireland in summer 2024, based on our attendance at the *Reading the Riots* workshop. We begin by exploring how our personal and professional identities have led us to an interest in ‘reading the riots’ and shaped our interpretations of these events. Next, we introduce the concept of subjectivities and the third space to think through how we can come to understand and interpret the riots. Having considered the official reports that have been produced in response to the riots, we suggest that aside from the report titled ‘Children’s Involvement in the Riots’, there is often an absence of listening to each other when trying to interpret and understand the ‘conditions’ that contributed to the riots. This leads us to propose that our role as academics should be focused on listening to a diverse range of perspectives and stories if we are to successfully ‘read the riots’.

Introduction

The *Reading the Riots* workshop in May 2025 was developed as a space for academics from different disciplines, and different stages of their respective careers, to think through the riots that took place across England and Northern Ireland during the summer of 2024. Specifically, the workshop aimed to consider the role of academics in analysing and interpreting the riots. In this short piece, we (Laurie and Charlotte), share some reflections and ideas based on our experience of attending the *Reading the Riots*

workshop. For us, one of the questions that emerged during the workshop was not only about the role of academics in reading the riots, but *who* academics are. With this in mind, we draw upon concepts related to subjectivities and the third space, to question the identities of academics involved in reading the riots, and propose that ‘listening’ is an important part of our role as we seek to understand the conditions that facilitated the riots in 2024. What we hope to do in this reflective piece is to provide some ideas that came up for us during the workshop. We don’t offer any conclusions or ‘answers’, but some ‘work in progress’ thoughts that we wanted to share with a broader community for provocation and discussion. We see this piece as part of a dialogue that started between ourselves and that we’d like to extend and invite you, the reader, to join us in.

Context and Caveats

One of the first discussion points at the workshop was for us to share why we had decided to attend. As the group shared their motivations for attending, we realised we had both been motivated to attend largely due to a personal, rather than professional, curiosity about the topic. Neither of us are an ‘expert’ in the area of riots, far-right movements or violence more generally, and none of these areas feature within our research. With this in mind, the ideas presented in this piece are very much informed by our broader experiences of teaching and researching within Sociology and Criminology respectively, and our identities beyond the role of academia, which we will come to next.

The identities of academics was raised during the workshop. For some in the group, academics were perceived to be ‘global’, ‘cosmopolitan’ people that could draw upon their wide range of experiences, of possibly living and learning within different places and cultures, to analyse and interpret social events such as the riots. For some in the workshop, this illustration of academics may have resonated. However, we questioned whether this fit with our own self-perception, which pushed us to ask: *who are academics? Are they who we think they are? And on what basis do they come to read, engage with and attempt to understand different aspects of social life?* We found this particularly poignant given that both of us can be considered as ‘early career’. We are engaged in a process of ‘becoming’ academics, learning what this means to us and how we’ll come to embody and undertake the role of *being* an academic and researcher. We discussed this particularly over lunchtime. Both of us stated in our introduction that we felt our family backgrounds informed our feelings and understandings towards the riots. Over lunch, we questioned whether this idea that academics were ‘global’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ represented all academics, and specifically, if this represented us. We are both white, female, early career academics in our early thirties. We are both the first in our families to attend university, having grown up in and around Leicester, a city that has been impacted by deindustrialisation and austerity. Perhaps somewhat unusually, we are both now teaching and researching at the University within the city where we were both born, raised and worked before entering academia. Over lunch, we talked about how

tricky it could be to navigate the different worlds of 'academia' and the world of our family and home life. Yet we also felt this gave us diverse perspectives of social phenomena.

For instance, we had both discussed the riots with our families and friends, but not academically. For us, the workshop was a space to bridge those 'dinner-table' conversations that are situated within our local area, with our role as academics. What was powerful about the workshop, was that it provided a respectful space for us to draw on our diverse experiences as academics and as people who either identify as 'global' or local' citizens, as we tried to 'read the riots' together. The workshop was a space to listen to each other and bring together the discussions we have had about the riots in our communities, as 'ordinary' women, with our role as 'academics'. Although, the juxtaposition between being an ordinary person and being an academic is not lost on us!

As the workshop progressed, as a group we came up with various factors or 'conditions' that could have contributed to the violence in summer 2024. This includes, but was not limited to:

- The attacks and murders of three girls in Southport in summer 2024.
- The role of social media in spreading misinformation about the identity of the Southport attacker initially, and later on around migration more generally. Social media was also perceived to have a role in facilitating the organisation of violence.
- The role of racism, and notably Islamophobia, which can be seen to fuel the violence against minority groups and particularly those that have migrated to the UK in the hope of claiming asylum.
- People from certain backgrounds, particularly the 'white working class', and those living in deindustrialised areas possibly feeling frustrated due to limited access to stable employment, housing and healthcare. In the workshop, we discussed how these challenges were often attributed to higher rates of migration in the mass media, social media and even in politics, ignoring the part that decades of austerity have played in limiting some people's access to civic rights and opportunities.
- We considered whether feelings of frustration due to limited access to services have been exacerbated since Brexit given the leave campaign misleadingly advocated that people would see increase funding and access to services such as the NHS, on leaving the European Union (Pope, 2018).

These issues provide an overview of some of the topics that came up during the workshop as we attempted to read the riots together. We wondered if this was only one side of the story, and what other possibilities, explanations or answers might be available.

Third-Space Subjectivities

After the workshop we, the authors, got together to discuss our reflections and the possibility of writing together. Two concepts we have each respectively worked with seemed to help us explain the experience. For Laurie this was the concept of ‘multiple subjectivities’ from feminist auto/biography and for Charlotte the concept of ‘third-space’ from the access to higher education literature. We’ve now started to think about these together as third-space subjectivities, which we feel the workshop facilitated.

Parsons and Chappell (2020) argue researchers and academics occupy “multiple subject positions” (3). What this means is we are never just *academics* or *researchers* but are also daughters, wives, sisters, friends, neighbours, mothers and more besides. In ‘reading’ the riots through this workshop, both authors here reflected on how their multiple subject positions informed their understanding and they ‘read’ the riots from these multiple subject positions. In this way engaging with the riots and attempting to understand them becomes a “storied reworking of the self” (3), as aspects of our subjectivity are made visible and are at stake in doing this interpretive work. This makes it crucial not only to be reflexive about what elements of ourselves we ‘bring to the table’ in academic work, but in opening ourselves to the possibility for other perspectives. What possibilities do we close off by not incorporating other views; what ideas or issues do we miss when we don’t engage in self-reflexivity?

For us, the workshop became a space which brought together the personal and professional. Theorists have used the ‘third-space’ to explain a space in between two worlds or perspectives. For instance, commuter students being in a third-space as they navigate between their university and home life (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). Although the third-space here does not necessarily have to refer to a physical space, in many ways the workshop was a ‘third-space’. It was separate from the traditional ‘space’ of a university seminar room that is often characterised by hierarchy, by feeling unable to fully engage as ECRs or PhD students, because it was open. It seemed to us that everyone contributed something that day and drew not just on their insights from their studies, but also from their insights of being a member of society, of how their knowledge and ideas were shaped by their families, friends, communities, being a parent, friend, spouse etc. It was encouraged to bring this tacit knowledge in as we tried to read the riots together.

The workshop illustrated the power of talking to each other and combining different experiences to understand this issue. It became a ‘third-space’ where we could bring our multiple subject positions into the interpretive process of ‘reading’ the riots, in what we think could be called third-space subjectivities. This needs to continue, not just amongst academics. We are a varied group, as our reflections have showed, but to truly understand and read the riots, we argue our role as academics is to listen. To each other and to others as we continue to learn about why things happen the way they do and most importantly, why people are motivated to do what they do. As Cotterill and Letherby (1993, p.68) argue, “all feminist work should be fundamentally concerned with how people come to

understand what they do.” As part of this listening and learning we would suggest it is the role of academics to elicit as many stories, experiences and perspectives as possible.

Listening, Storytelling & the Children’s Commissioner Report

We explored the role of stories and storytelling during the workshop itself, recognising that stories play a really important role in how we make sense of our everyday lives. So too do stories help make sense of what – and why – certain things happen at particular moments in time. So too do stories help to provide insight into why some choose to commit violence. For those who were involved in the riots, all would have had a story about why they were motivated to do so. Numerous reports were shared and discussed on the day which explored motivations, causes and possible solutions to the riots. However, we noticed that only one of these reports had *listened* to the people involved and attempted to elicit their stories and perspectives. This was the *Children’s Involvement in the Riots* report published by the Children’s Commissioner in January 2025. Both authors ‘resonated’ with this report more than some of the others because its methodology involved speaking directly to children and young people, including some who had been charged following their participation in the riots. It works well as an example of what we’re suggesting here.

On reading this report more thoroughly after the workshop, it became clear to us that its effectiveness lies in its potential to offer different narratives or stories about the riots, including why they happened and what motivated people to take part. During the workshop we focussed on ‘causes’ and ‘conditions of possibility’ of the riots as those ones highlighted in the bullet points above. Quotations and findings from children included in the Children’s Commissioner report (2025) push us to reflect on this differently, one child suggested some “were just there to have fun” (5) whilst another said they didn’t know why they got involved, “just the fact that there’s loads of people there and everyone’s on a team” (5). These two quotes – whilst not excusing actions and behaviours during the riots – point to feelings of belonging and excitement which seem to have been overlooked in other narratives about the riots. The report also highlights animosity in some places with the police, with one child quoted saying the riots were “an opportunity” (16) to fight the police. The Report also states that some children thought they were attending a peaceful protest, not a riot. Some tried to leave once it escalated but couldn’t because of road blockages and police cordons. Spontaneous, complicated, thrill-seeking, unintended and regrettable circumstances underpin some of these children’s involvement, none of which came up during the workshop, and none of which seems to have been discussed in the mainstream media. This attests to the importance of listening to people ‘on the ground’ and considering their experiences. It also forces us to confront the multiple subject positions of ‘rioters’ - in this case, they are at once ‘rioters’ as well as children.

Closing Thoughts

The question of who we are and what our role is as academics and researchers is something we, as early career researchers, are forced to confront quite regularly. However, based on these reflections and our experience in the workshop, this is something all academics should do as regularly as possible. Using this insight and some concepts from our PhD research, what we urge is that academics have a role to play in gathering stories and listening to different perspectives, recognising complex subjectivity and personhood of ourselves and others. This is ultimately with the aim of bringing stories, perspectives and experiences out of the margins/shadows and into the light, so that we may deal with them. This includes listening to perspectives that may be difficult to hear or which we do not agree with. Leaving these to lurk – unheard – may only serve to do more harm than good, and may conceal the possibility to find effective solutions to the riots. This position resonates with calls for a critical theory lens towards political violence, which encourages us to respond to violence by trying to understand what injustices people are experiencing and what causes them (O'Neill, 2010). This can allow for a process of conflict resolution to begin, which should involve all those implicated by the causes of the conflict. As O'Neill (2010, p.137) notes “to make something understandable is not the same as to justify it”. This workshop was an example of where this understanding of violence started to be done, occupying a third-space which allowed multiple subject positions to come forward.

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About the authors

LAURIE PARSONS is Lecturer in the School of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leicester, UK. Laurie's research interests include the use of auto/biographical, feminist and creative methods to research families, family practices and everyday life. Laurie is particularly interested in how people make sense of their experiences and how this relates to affect, narrative and memory.

CHARLOTTE BROOKS is a Teaching Fellow in the School of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leicester, UK. Charlotte's research interests focus on access to education and exploring the 'collateral consequences' of a criminal record in the United Kingdom. Charlotte is particularly interested in how a criminal record can impact access to university and subsequent career options.

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Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies,
University of Leicester,
University Road,
Leicester,
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United Kingdom
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lias@leicester.ac.uk

