I'd love to smash the Ritz...

September 29 2011

Kevin Dutton. Credit: www.inkwellphotographic.com

The riots weren't funny. Let's get that straight right from the start. But for those who tuned in on YouTube, they did have some comic moments. In Tottenham, on the opening night, a group of hoodies bulldozed their way into a somnolent McDonald's and began frying their own burgers and chips. Then, a couple of days later, we had the bungling loon who hurled a brick at the window of the O2 store, only to see it come whistling back past his ears and ricochet off the cranium of an even bigger loon standing behind him about to make off with the contents of his rucksack.

But the funniest and most poignant moment of all didn't take place on the polystyrene-strewn streets of London, Birmingham or Manchester. It took place during an innocuous set at this year's Edinburgh Fringe, where comedian Andrew Maxwell made the following observation: "I'd love to smash the Ritz…or stay at the Ritz." Of all that's been written in

the past month or so, those eleven simple words say it all.

I've never been one for simple explanations. But on this occasion, I'm prepared to make exceptions. Many a true word is spoken in jest, they say, and in Maxwell's case that aphorism is spot on. I'm not a bleeding-heart-Liberal. Of course there was a criminal element involved in the proceedings. But there were also people with honest, genuine grievances. Not all of them 'youf' on the look-out for 'fings for free.' Some of them were well into their sixties and were more interested, as one of them put it, in 'fings for tea.'

Let's park the social commentary on one side for a moment and do a bit of science. Buried deep in the archives of organisational psychology, there's a model of conflict resolution called the Fire model. Conflict, the model proposes, like fire, needs three things to take hold: a spark, combustible material, and oxygen. In the case of the riots, the spark, indisputably, was the death of Mark Duggan: a candle lit in vigil that fell, or, rather, was torn by opportunistic brigands, from its holder. The combustible material was the simmering social unrest that bubbles away just beneath the surface of many of England's deprived inner cities. The oxygen was the cuts to a dithering, dispirited police force.

I had a cup of tea with one of the rioters a couple of weekends ago in the remains of a café in Camden. He's the son of a friend of mine, and I've known him since he was a baby. Now 19, and a talented artist, Leroy missed out on university last year because he came up short on his grades. Pain and anxiety were etched across his face. "What has the government done for me, man?" he shrugs. "I grew up here. But the youth clubs shut down about the same time as they [the government] started putting pressure on young people to go to university to keep up with other countries. Then they put the tuition fees up. What chance do people like me have round here? You know, I'm proud of myself, man. I almost did it despite all that. But you still feel a failure if you don't make

it to the Promised Land. Because the way things are set up round here, there ain't nothing else. Except prison. If you ain't been to university or prison, you ain't been nowhere. You don't belong."

It's a sobering thought that Wormwood Scrubs and Strangeways might fast be becoming the gap year destination of choice for modern school leavers. But that's the way things are heading. The prevailing view over the past few weeks has been one, understandably, of disdain. The young people we saw smashing up shops and helping themselves to their contents have no respect for their communities.

Yet I, for one, don't buy it. Not for a second.

In fact, I think the opposite might be true. Community is all they have. Ask teenagers and young adults who self-harm why they do it, and they often report that the pain of a blade across smooth, compliant skin masks, albeit fleetingly, a deeper, greater, more invidious pain within. Ask prison inmates why they trash their own cells and smear excrement on the walls, and they tell you pretty much the same thing. Seeing shit on the bed takes their mind off the shit in their head. Ask inner city youths why they trash their own high streets, and what do they say? We don't really know – because at the moment, we're too busy listening to what the media and the politicians are saying.

No one can excuse the looting. And no one can excuse the violence. But what we can do is try to understand it. There's a difference. Dangerous psychological riptides operate on people in crowds. On the one hand, crowds deindividuate. Force of numbers loosens inhibitions. Researchers have shown that individuals make riskier decisions if they're part of a crowd at night than if they've drunk three pints of beer on their own in the daytime.

On the other hand, crowds unite. They exert a gravitational pull on

individual members to conform. In one experiment that hitched the latest in social networking to its earliest, biological origins, a team at the University of Arizona found that when users of an Internet chat room are made to feel under threat, they show signs of 'sticking together'. Their views display convergence, and they become more likely to conform to the attitudes and opinions of others in the forum. In another experiment, conducted by researchers at the University of Limerick, it was found that when members of an in-group are made to feel bored (by having to perform a monotonous task in the lab for a long period of time), they show similar favouritism to members of their own group. In a forensic setting, for instance, they hand down lighter sentences for an assault if the perpetrator shares their own nationality than if the assailant is of a different ethnic background.

Listen to the politicians, by all means. But if it's an empirical, scientifically-validated explanation you're after, it's the psychologists you should be turning to. Feelings of boredom and victimisation were two of the primary reasons cited by the rioters themselves for their actions a couple of weeks ago.

Last month, I took part in a BBC Radio 4 discussion about the riots with a man called Pat Reid. Pat works in London with some of the toughest inner city gang members in the hood, trying to turn them round, trying to show them how to go legit. Trying, in other words, to fill the forbidding moral vacuum created by a mind-boggling paucity of good male role models within certain communities: a dearth, in turn, often precipitated by a precarious superfluity of young, single-parent families. The girls get pregnant, and the boys, disillusioned, leg it.

Speaking with Pat, I was struck by the parallels between what he said about hopelessness, about the profound sense of existential desolation felt by the many of the young people he comes into contact with, and with the observations of the humanist psychologist Viktor Frankl back in

the 1940s. In 1942, Frankl, an Austrian Jew, was taken prisoner by the Nazis and spent almost three years in a number of concentration camps, including Auschwitz, until he was liberated by the Americans on April 27, 1945.

He was one of the lucky ones, and unlike many of his compatriots, he survived. Why? mused Frankl. Was there, he wondered, some primeval psychological dynamic at work here? Slowly but surely, his research uncovered a stark, irreducible truth. The survivors were the ones who had clung to the wreckage of hope; to the flotsam and jetsam of the dreams and the kisses of loved ones. His conclusion was strikingly simple: “Give me a why, and I’ll give you any how.”

Pat Reid is busy doing both right now on some of the roughest streets London can throw at him. Just coincidence that the riots kicked off where they did, and not in some of the more affluent parts of our cities? I don’t think so. Back in the café in north London, I’m treated by Leroy to what I believe, in the trade, is called black humour. “Amy Winehouse was found lying face down in a pile of piss and vomit,” he quips. “Other people know it as Camden.”

Ho ho. But this is not the kind of joke that Pat Reid finds particularly amusing. “Who is it that kids look up to on these inner city estates?” he asks. “It’s the drug dealers who cruise around in their BMW Z4s wearing all the latest brands. What we need to do is teach these kids how to get there legitimately; how to be successful, but how to do it legally. And the key to that message is education.”

As a start, Pat is using one of the oldest influence strategies in the book: the principle of self-interest. No-one ever bought a drill because they wanted a drill, the old sales mantra goes. It’s because they wanted a hole. The same goes for much of our inner city youth, and mathematics. Show a 13-year-old kid a quadratic equation and try to teach them how to solve

it, and the chances are that within a very short space of time they're going to be staring out the classroom window. Gawping, most probably, at the drug dealer's new set of wheels. But show them how that same quadratic equation could help them turn a profit, could one day help them walk into a Porsche showroom and lay down a hundred grand, and you might just keep their attention. "You might," as Pat rather wryly puts it, "actually teach them a thing or two."

And not before time. It's a crucial lesson, and one that's long overdue. Last year's youth unemployment figures for those aged between 15-24 hovered at 19.5%, up by over 5% from those of 2007. Similarly, the latest figures from the Home Office's British Crime Survey reveal that domestic burglaries rose by 14% from 2010 to 2011, and violent crime by 6%.

Getting kids off the street is the easy part. Getting them back on the street, and heading in the right direction, is a different matter entirely.

Of course, education is just one area of concern on which psychology has a bearing. The power of social norms, a fundamental principle of influence just as efficacious as that of self-interest, has been shown to be useful in tackling another of the problems identified by Pat Reid as a contributor to urban unrest: the rise in teenage pregnancies, and the attendant lack of good male role models, in many inner city areas.

Research has shown that a key weakness of the standard sex education leaflets traditionally distributed amongst schools and colleges throughout the UK is an overemphasis on statistics – on facts and figures about sex and STDs, at the expense of a more empirical focus on those influences on teenage behaviour which actually work: influences, for instance, such as core self-image and peer-related social pressure. It emerges, for example, that young people are often unsure as to how prevalent sexual activity really is among their peers, and that those who are sexually

active at a young age frequently feel uncomfortable about the use of contraception due to the inherent possibility of negative implications: either of their own promiscuity, or of a lack of trust in their partner.

Along quantum trajectories of human behaviour such as this, the normal laws of logic and common sense can sometimes break down. As a case in point, take the standard procedure of inviting teenage parents in to schools to voice their regrets about choosing to start a family so early in life. Such a strategy, to many people, seems to make intuitive sense. Yet it's been found, somewhat ironically, to have precisely the opposite effect on many young people, not only enabling them to imagine themselves in that situation, and rendering it more normal, but also portraying the young mothers standing in front of them as being somewhat more mature, grown-up, and sophisticated than they actually are.

In fact, coming full circle back to Pat Reid, one of the biggest predictors of both early sexual activity and lower educational attainment among young people is, it turns out, poor self-image. Many teenagers report feeling disempowered both at home and at school, and that sex, rightly or wrongly, is their 'out': an easily accessible route to respect, control, and maturity.

Of course, it's one thing identifying the problem, quite another uncovering the solution. But psychology is primed to do both. In some areas of the UK, for instance, sex education leaflets and classes have already been modified in recognition of the precedence that self-esteem issues and peer group norms take over cold, hard, disembodied 'facts' in the decision-making processes of young people – especially when it comes to birth control.

And schools have begun to take a new approach to visits. Rather than inviting just teenage mothers in to talk, they have begun to set up panels

of former pupils to reflect upon their lives and relationships: an eclectic cross-section of individuals representative of a variety of 'alternative futures' as opposed to just a single, dominant 'norm'. A typical panel, for instance, might consist of five ex-pupils in their 20s, three of whom do not have any children. Of these, one might be recently married, one might be in a long-term relationship, and one might have recently split up with their partner. The fourth member of the panel might be recently married, and have just had a child, while the fifth might be a teenage parent.

"The future comes too fast for a lot of the kids I deal with," Pat Reid tells me. "So what we try to do is put it off just long enough so they've got the skills to deal with it."

As the riots were taking place in England, I was on holiday in the south of Ireland. While I was there, I met up with a friend of mine who's a musician. Back in the 1960s, he wrote a song called Waterloo Sunset, the last verse of which contains the following lines:

"Millions of people swarming like flies round Waterloo Underground;

But Terry and Julie cross over the river, where they feel safe and sound."

Who were Terry and Julie, I asked him? His answer was eerily poignant. Once, he said, he happened to be standing on Waterloo Bridge, and saw two young people crossing over it. "I didn't know who they were, or where they were going," he recounted. "But I knew they were heading into the future."

It's a stone's throw from Waterloo Bridge to the Ritz. The challenge, for people like Leroy, is not to take that literally. And the challenge for society in general – psychologists, politicians, indeed, all of us – as we try to facilitate that process, is to leave none of those stones unturned.

Dr. Dutton is author of Flipnosis – the Art of Split Second Persuasion (William Heinemann, 2010).

Provided by University of Cambridge