Reporting the Riots: Parenting Culture and the Problem of Authority in Media Analysis of August 2011

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Abstract

This article reviews the results of a small study of the national British newspapers in the period immediately following the 2011 riots, which analyses the ways in which political and media discourse linked the riots to the problem of 'parenting'. It examines three discourses that arise from this linkage: (a) a generalised 'moral collapse'; (b) the specific problem of 'troubled families'; and (c) parenting policy and the problem of discipline. From this, I propose there is a fourth, 'missing discourse', which would situate the problem of parental authority within a wider crisis of adult authority. Drawing on historical and sociological reflections on the problem of parental authority in the late modern period, I propose that a more fruitful discussion would take account of the ways in which parenting culture and policy has challenged assumptions about generational responsibility.

Keywords: *Parenting, Riots, Authority, Discipline, Moral, Experts, Sure Start, Troubled Families, Policy, Media*

Introduction

1.1 In the immediate response to the 2011 riots, politicians and media commentators from across the political spectrum homed in on the problem of 'parenting' as a causal factor, and drew links with a broader 'moral crisis' of twenty-first century society. Those leaning towards the right emphasised the problem of permissiveness, looking to the Sixties and the ensuing 'culture wars' as the primary cause of the contemporary moral malaise (Phillips 2011; Montgomerie 2011), while those from the left focused on consumerism and the social and economic inequalities of late modern capitalism (Klein 2011; Miliband 2011). Both parables of decline, however, shared the motif that individual behaviour is the mere product of wider social circumstances, and sought solutions in mechanisms of social control. Thus, the right-wing response called for a stronger response by the forces of law and order, while the left-wing response sought welfarist forms of control, in the form of state-run services ('youth clubs') and therapeutic engagement (Donzelot 1980; Nolan 1998).

1.2 In this article, I review the results of a small study of the national British newspapers in the period immediately following the riots, which analyses the ways in which political and media discourse linked the riots to 'parenting'. I examine the themes that arise from this linkage, to do with a wider crisis of social and moral values, and the problem of authority, within the discourses used to discuss these themes. I go on to discuss the solutions that were posed to the 'parenting crisis' in the aftermath of the riots, and examine the apparent contradiction between a diagnosis that sees intervention by the state into parenting practices as both a cause of the crisis of parental authority, and its only possible solution. I note that, in the immediate aftermath of the riots, a concern emerged that family intervention projects, designed to achieve 'better parenting', had contributed to the crisis of parental discipline that came to be seen as significant in stoking the riots. Furthermore, while 'poor parenting' emerged as one of several factors in what was understood to be a widespread social and cultural malaise, this was highlighted by politicians across the party political divide as a specific problem deserving of attention and intervention: perhaps indicating the paucity of wider 'social solutions' currently considered at a policy level.

1.3 I conclude by situating the problem of parental authority within a wider crisis of adult authority, which has ramifications beyond the family to impact on the wider community and institutions of the state. My study indicates that the difficulties reported by parents in feeling confident in their ability to discipline their children appeared, in this instance, to be related to the struggles experienced by the police in intervening decisively and effectively into the riots. The weakness of adult authority underpinned equally the problem of parental discipline, the authority of adults in the community, and the authority of the institutions of the state. However, this connection was not drawn out in the media coverage. Thus in addition to the three discourses used explicitly in the media coverage, I propose that a fourth, 'missing discourse' would look beyond the immediate questions posed by the riots and the apparent solutions posed by policy to their deeper political and cultural roots. In the discussion section of this article, I draw

on the insights of historical and sociological literature on the problem of adult authority to approach a deeper understanding of how this problem relates to events of August 2011.

Methodology

2.1 Following, in August 2011, the media discussion about the riots, I was struck by the ease and frequency with which 'poor parenting' appeared as a causal explanation for these events. To gain a more systematic understanding about how the way in which parenting and the riots were linked, I conducted a media analysis of a selection of national British newspapers over the period 1–31 August 2011, using Nexis: a comprehensive, searchable database of articles sourced from the world press, to which many academic institutions subscribe. The dataset included broadsheet newspapers known to have different political outlooks – *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and their Sunday versions – and tabloid newspapers *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, and *The Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror*. A search of the broadsheet press for the terms 'parenting' and 'riots' over the date period 1–31 August 2011 yielded 126 results; a search of *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, and *The Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror* yielded 21 results. Thus, a total of 147 articles from these sources linked 'parenting' with a discussion of the riots, establishing that this was a theme worth exploring further, and that it was not simply linked to the perspective of one particular newspaper

2.2 In order to analyse the articles within this dataset, I employed the research method of qualitative media analysis (QMA) (Altheide 1996). QMA differs from some other forms of discourse or content analysis in that it seeks to examine documents in their wider context, rather than focusing on a linguistic study of text; it is an interactionist approach, which allows an analysis of media content within the framework of broader social and cultural developments, and sits within the 'contextual constructionist' approach to the analysis of social problems (Berger & Luckmann 1991; Best 2008). As my interest here is in the way that the discussion of 'parenting' following the riots reflects and shapes wider cultural trends and policy developments, QMA seemed to provide the most effective method for this small study.

2.3 Having retrieved 147 articles in total, I used the technique of theoretical sampling (Altheide 1996: 19) to develop a sample small enough to allow for in-depth qualitative analysis. I sorted the articles by relevance, using a combination of this function within Nexis and my own assessment of which articles most directly addressed the issue of parenting within the context of the riots. This resulted in a dataset of 71 articles. I discarded duplicate articles and those that were not highly relevant, and 'collapsed together' articles that used broadly the same material (for example, a news report on a key speech by David Cameron), but presented a slightly different perspective. Finally, I used the CAQDAS software NVivo (version 9) to code the remaining articles according to the themes that emerged within these articles, adding context to the rhetorical linkage between 'parenting' and the riots. Below, I present the results of these findings within a discussion of the themes that emerge.

Findings

3.1 Three main themes emerged from my analysis of newspaper articles published in the immediate aftermath of the riots. The first was that a crisis of parenting was one among many features of a 'moral collapse' exhibited by British society in 2011. The second was that the problem of parenting could be laid at the door of a particular number of (particularly) 'troubled' families, and that increased state intervention into the lives of these families was warranted (see also Jensen 2013). The third related to a tentative discussion about the extent to which parenting policy in recent decades, which has been designed to improve parenting, has had a corrosive effect on parental authority, thus exacerbating many of the problems to do with the control of children and young people that such policy set out to address. Below, I provide a brief analysis of the discourses used by the national press to discuss these themes, noting that a certain ambivalence surrounds both claims made about inadequate parenting, and the solutions proposed by the government.

'Slow-motion moral collapse'

3.2 Where the focus on parenting appeared in the aftermath of the riots, it tended to be situated within a broader social and cultural malaise. This was reflected in the rhetoric by senior politicians from across the political divide. The week after the riots, Prime Minister David Cameron gave a widely-reported speech in which he promised to 'confront the "slow-motion moral collapse" behind these events. In this speech, 'parenting' was presented as one of a host of ills purportedly facing modern Britain, with the Prime Minister announcing a review of 'government policy on schools, welfare, families, parenting, addiction, communities, and... the "cultural, legal, bureaucratic problems in our society"'.^[1] In this narrative, the failure of the state to hold firm against the apparent forces of degeneration was highlighted: 'Some of the worst aspects of human nature have been tolerated, indulged – sometimes even incentivised – by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally demoralised'.^[2]

3.3 In this narrative, the role of the state was positioned as the need to intervene more strongly against problematic elements of society outside of the family – for example, in Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith's overstated concerns about the problem of gangs.^[3] But it also represented a clear intention to intervene more strongly within the family itself, as in the highly-publicised 'crackdown on 120,000 feckless families'.^[4] *The Daily Telegraph* reported:

The Prime Minister said that the collapse of families was the main factor which had led to last week's turmoil and said that politicians had to be braver in addressing decades of erosion of traditional social values... 'The question people asked over and over again last week was "where are the parents? Why aren't they keeping the rioting kids indoors?"', he said. 'Tragically that's been followed in some cases by judges rightly lamenting: "why don't the parents even turn up when their children are in court?" Well, join the dots and you have a clear idea about why some of these young people were behaving so terribly. Either there was no one at home, they didn't much care or they'd lost control.'^[5]

3.4 While 'parenting' was made central to the Prime Minister's claims about the problems of modern Britain and the causes of the riots, it was presented not as the only cause, but one important element of a

generalised moral crisis, to which the political and cultural elites had contributed. In a similar vein, the problem of the elite's inability to provide good modelling behaviour formed the centre-piece of Labour Party leader Ed Miliband's diagnosis. In this speech, delivered on the same day as the Prime Minister's, Miliband offered 'similar observations about "greed, selfishness and immorality"',^[6] yet his focus was on 'the cult of instant celebrity', in which '[b]ankers, politicians, footballers and musicians have made easy money while ordinary families struggle to get by'.^[7] ^[8] The Labour leader was careful to formulate a response that, like David Cameron, brought 'parental responsibility' clearly into the frame:

Parental responsibility is a big issue... there is also an issue about responsibility of people at the top of our society and the message they send to our young people... What happened in the banking system, what happened with MPs' expenses, what happened with phone hacking isn't the same as looting, but it is about responsibility.^[9]

3.5 The rhetoric employed by senior politicians from both sides of the party political divide thus situated inadequate parenting as a consequence of a wider 'moral collapse', for which the elite was partially responsible; yet highlighted the family as an area in which it was possible and necessary to intervene. This article now examines two themes to emerge from this diagnosis of the parenting problem in relation to the riots: (1) the need for more aggressive intervention against a particular group of 'troubled families' by the state, and (2) the crisis of parental authority that appears to have been brought about by 'too much' state intervention in the family during the New Labour years.

'Poor parenting' and troubled families

3.6 Prime Minister David Cameron's pledge, in the immediate aftermath of the riots, that he would 'turn around the lives of 120,000 troubled families before the next election',^[10] was greeted with no small amount of scepticism from commentators. This was not driven by a sentiment that singling out and intervening upon these families would be problematic in principle; rather, the tone was cynicism about the apparent hypocrisy of a government that had cut other family services and sought to distance itself from what it described as New Labour's 'Nanny State' approach. The term 'nanny state' has been deployed by the Coalition government variously to denote high levels of state expenditure on public services (and hence justify cuts to welfare services in a time of economic crisis), and the tendency towards an increasing regulation of individuals' lifestyles, behaviour, and parenting practices – which, as we discuss below, appears to be a trend continued by the present government, in the fields of parenting and public health.

3.7 The present government's programme of cuts to welfare spending has been justified both with an economic rationale ('austerity budget') and a strong moral dimension (reducing people's dependency on handouts from the state), while the high levels of state spending and programmes of parenting 'support' introduced by the previous, Labour government have been criticised both for contributing to the economic crisis and encouraging a culture of entitlement. Yet despite this rhetorical opposition to an interventionist state, as Gillies (2011) notes, this government has 'demonstrated particularly strong enthusiasm for the concept of relationship support, investing an extra £30 million to develop new provision, in the context of deep cuts to already existing public services', reflecting 'a subtle but distinct shift in conservative family rhetoric to embrace a competence model alongside more traditional investments and values' (Gillies 2011, para 8.3). The competence model is also promoted by the Coalition government's continued commitment to the provision of 'parenting classes', and its desire to reconfigure New Labour's flagship 'early intervention' programme Sure Start, discussed further below, in line with its own policy trajectory emphasising the need for official monitoring and intervention in the first years of children's lives (see Field 2010; Allen 2011).

3.8 Thus, implicitly drawing attention to this contradiction in the wake of the riots, the *Guardian* reported:

There is even talk – from the very same David Cameron who not long ago was saying the state should not intervene to change individuals' behaviour – of curfews, banning face masks, evicting criminals from council housing, tougher court powers, curbing social media, not to mention more "robust" policing and teaching parenting skills. 'We've got to get out there and make a positive difference to the way people bring up their children... and we've got to be less sensitive to the charge that this is about interfering or nannying,' Cameron said.^[11]

Given the mixed success of New Labour's family intervention projects, some commentators raised doubts the extent to which David Cameron's version could work. The *Guardian* noted that 'Labour had similarly ambitious aims for intervention programmes; Gordon Brown promised to tackle "more than 110,000 problem families with disruptive young people" in 2008'; but 'that promise, made during public disquiet over knife crime, was never fulfilled', and in 2010, 'only 3,518 families were actually in the programme'.^[12]

3.9 It is worth reflecting briefly on the relationship between David Cameron's 'troubled families' initiative and New Labour's suite of initiatives designed to 'improve parenting' (Blair 2005). The assumption behind the Coalition Government's 'troubled families' initiative was that the collapse of Britain's social fabric, revealed by the riots, was fuelled by a specific group of deviant families (numbering precisely 120,000) (Department for Communities and Local Government 2012). The multiple problems experienced by these families were indicated by the fact that they were 'known' to various agencies of the state, from the justice system to social workers to schools. The justification for focusing on these specific families was that their problematic behaviour allegedly spread like contagion through the rest of the community, and it was claimed that what was needed was a more coordinated form of therapeutic 'support' to 'contain' their influence.

3.10 The figures employed by the 'troubled families' initiative have been strongly contested, as has this policy's narrative about the culturalisation of poverty and the assumption that adverse behaviours spread through the generations (Tyler 2013; Jensen 2013). As Levitas (2012: 4) has noted, 'if we interrogate the research behind the imputed existence of 120,000 troubled families, this turns out to be a factoid – something that takes the form of a fact, but is not. It is used to support policies that in no way follow from the research on which the figure is based'. It is interesting, however, that while the 'troubled families'

initiative has been understood as a punitive and problematic measure, it represents an interesting inversion of the previous government's initial conception of the 'Sure Start' early intervention programme, which was widely received as a positive initiative that aimed to support (rather than penalize) disadvantaged (rather than 'troubled') families.

3.11 Inspired by the Head Start programme in the USA, the policy objective of Sure Start was that socially disadvantaged families – young parents, those with low incomes, and/or families living in certain 'deprived areas' – could be helped towards social mobility and conformity through parenting support. As Parker (2010) explains, the New Labour government's parenting policy was informed by an agenda that sought to promote the illusion that citizens could (and should) achieve a middle class identity through the regulation of parenting behaviour, and Sure Start was as one of a number of social policy initiatives 'forming the plank of governments' strategic formation of "classnessness" (via citizenship)' (Parker 2010: 20). In its original conception, Sure Start programmes would be situated in deprived areas but also attract non-deprived families, whose positive approach to parenting would trickle down to improve parenting at the wider community level. Later in the New Labour government, Sure Start became less community-based and more centralized around 'Children's Centres'; under the Coalition government, the programme was focused more tightly on reaching problematic families, leading to the closure of services used by non-deprived members of local communities and the recruitment of a number of health visitors to provide more of a directly policing role of targeted areas (for a discussion of Sure Start, see Barlow et al. 2007; Belsky et al. 2006, 2007; Clarke 2006; Hey & Bradford 2006; Conservative Party 2010).

3.12 The continuity between Sure Start, which pioneered a form of 'trickle-down' behaviourism to be measured in terms of 'positive parenting', and the Coalition government's 'troubled families' initiative, reveals an interesting consensus about the extent to which the problem of order in twenty-first century Britain is seen to lie at the level of the practices of the family, and the solution to lie in more intimate intervention into the family by agencies of the state. This shows a shift both away from the attempt to look to issues of class, gender and race in order to understand social problems, and a shift away from policy that (to some degree) endorsed the autonomy of the family, towards an 'explicit' family policy that seeks a more directly controlling role (Clarke 2007; Gillies 2011).

3.13 Aside from the resulting failure to examine deeper causes of social problems, the consensus about the need to focus on family practices is problematic in its own terms, as it fails to address the extent to which existing policy has adversely affected parents' capacity to exercise their authority. This became apparent in another theme that emerged from the aftermath of the riots: a concern that family intervention projects themselves had contributed to the crisis of parental discipline that came to be seen as significant in stoking the riots.

The problem of parental discipline

3.14 Under the New Labour government, parenting policy had an expansive focus, seeking to change particular child-rearing practices among all sections of society. Alice Thomson, writing in the *Times*, alludes to this:

It's not a class issue. There is divorce, dysfunction and dadlessness in Croydon and Chelsea. Parents work too hard or not enough. Few of us know how to discipline our children properly; they've become our friends and we are nervous even to suggest that they make their own beds... But it is going to be difficult to change any parent overnight and in some of the hardest cases Mr Cameron is talking about a frustrating waste of time. Tony Blair's been there and failed to have done that already. He brought in 'supernannies' in 77 areas with high levels of antisocial behaviour to teach parents how to control their youngsters. But no one respected his Respect agenda. Nor can you make parents more responsible by sending them to parenting classes. As one father at court explained this week: 'They told me it was all about rewards, never shout at my son, never tell him off and now he's been caught nicking stuff.'^[13]

The difficulty experienced by parents in the exercise of discipline was dwelt on at length by an article in the *Guardian*, which contained an interview with Clasford Stirling MBE, 'a veteran youth worker' who runs the football club at Broadwater Farm community centre in Tottenham.^[14] 'Parents are fearful about how they chastise their children,' he said. 'There's been an erosion of authority for a long time. Parents move very gingerly not to upset their own kids – that's the reality'. Stirling continued:

'Why aren't the parents calling up their children and saying, "Come back here at once"? They can't. Those days are gone, that authority has gone. A lot of parents are not able to stop their child from going out. Young people have had enough. Look at how brazen they have become, going right up to police.'

The article went on to tell the story of 'Jane' (her name had been changed), a mother of teenage sons in Kilburn, whose '18-year-old son, Luke, was arrested on Sunday night, with a group of seven other boys aged between 14 and 19, on an estate in Kilburn, erecting a barricade to stop police cars entering the estate'. Jane told the *Guardian*:

I try to talk to him about right and wrong. So many kids have no fear of authority any more. They go into school and they call their teacher by their first name, there's no discipline in schools. No one is getting a proper education and then they leave school and can't work because there are no jobs.

The *Guardian* article cited above linked the problem of parental authority and discipline to a generalised crisis of adult authority, also expressed in young people's relationship with teachers and police officers. This theme is discussed further below.

3.15 Two comments made in the aftermath of the riots raised concerns about the extent to which parenting policy had encouraged the 'outsourcing' of parental responsibility. An article in the *Guardian* quoted Ted Cante, who led the inquiry into the riots in the North of Britain in 2001 and established the Institute of Community Cohesion, on the extent to which 'parent training' initiatives may disempower

parents:

[Ted Cattle] thinks the issue of parenting is more nuanced than the government has portrayed it. 'There's been so much emphasis on outsourcing parenting – pretending schools, Sure Start centres and community organisations are there to look after the kids, rather than reflect that actually parents are still responsible – that I think there's a major concern about how parents have partly felt disempowered by all that, but have also been prepared to take advantage of that disempowerment,' he says. ^[15]

In an interview with the *Times*, Shaun Bailey, head of the charity My Generation and widely promoted as an ambassador for the Coalition Government's 'Big Society' agenda, argued: 'We have nationalised child-raising'. Bailey continued:

People think that the government is responsible for their children – that weakens the family structure. One of the worst things as a parent is having nothing to teach your children; one of the worst things as a child is to believe that authority lies outside your parents. ^[16]

The discussion about the erosion of parental authority by policy that has intended to train people to be 'better parents' was arguably the most interesting and challenging element of the media discourse that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 riots. I have noted above that, while 'poor parenting' emerged as one of several factors in what was understood to be a widespread social and cultural malaise, this was highlighted by politicians across the party political divide as a specific problem deserving of attention and intervention. Because of the similarities between David Cameron's 'troubled families' initiative and New Labour's more overtly therapeutic policies designed on the premise of 'supporting families', some commentators were able to raise concerns about the potentially corrosive effects of such policies on the workings of parental authority.

3.16 However, this discourse is limited by the extent to which there is a cross-party consensus that something can and should be done by the state to 'improve parenting'. Consequently, even critics of intervention tended to argue for a (different) version of parent training. Thus Shaun Bailey followed his criticism of the state for having 'nationalised parenting' by an argument that 'school pupils should be taught about parenting from an early age, with teachers making very clear that being pregnant as a teenager is a bad thing'. ^[17] The conclusion reached by Alice Thomson was that, as 'supernannies' for parents did not work, more emphasis should be placed on the role of schools in socialising children, and that parents would gladly relinquish their authority in the interests of having better-behaved children:

Mothers and fathers appear relieved, not resentful, that someone is finally taking control. Many pupils now see teachers rather than gangs as their proxy family. Very few are excluded as they don't want to lose their ticket to a better life. ^[18]

In addition to the three discourses about parenting and the riots identified above, then, there appears to be a fourth, 'missing discourse', which would look beyond the immediate questions posed by the riots and the apparent solutions posed by policy to their deeper political and cultural roots. In the remainder of this article, I draw on the insights of historical and sociological literature on the problem of adult authority to approach a deeper understanding of how this problem relates to events of August 2011.

Discussion: Adult authority and contemporary parenting culture

4.1 I have written elsewhere about the problem of 'parent blaming', a powerful contemporary current where parents are held singlehandedly responsible for everything that might go wrong with their children's health, behaviour, achievements or happiness (Bristow 2009). This draws upon a large body of scholarship in the UK and USA about changes in parenting culture, policy and identity over the past quarter of a century. The scholarship includes historical accounts of changing ideas about the child, the family and the role of parenting 'experts' (Hardyment 2007; Gillis 1997; Cunningham 2006; Guldberg 2009); lesbian and gay parents, and these challenges to heteronormative accounts of the family (Taylor 2009); and the rise of 'intensive' parenting practices, which result from a heightened awareness of risk and a desire to manage uncertainty and disadvantage through ever-increasing levels of direct parental involvement in children's activities, play, and education (Hays 1996; Reay 1998; Furedi 2001; Hunt 2003; Gillies 2005, 2011; Taylor 2010; Lareau 2011).

4.2 As Gillies' (2011) analysis clarifies, these trends are brought together in a shift in the politics of the family, from the promotion of 'function' to an obsession with 'competence'. While political and moral strategies of post-war Britain (and North America) tended to focus on the preservation of norms about the family form, more recent strategies – in particular, those enshrined by the New Labour government and continued in the subsequent Coalition government – have deployed a rhetoric of diversity in relation to acceptable family forms, alongside an increasingly interventionist approach to family practices. Thus the current (Conservative) prime minister actively promotes gay marriage as a responsible and desirable social goal – something that would have been unthinkable among previous Conservative administrations – while also promoting forms of parental behaviour that conform to rigid, (middle)class ideas about engagement with children's education, the kind of food they should consume, and the types of activities in which they should be engaging. Across the political spectrum, '[t]heories of "individualisation" and "risk" have shifted attention away from the material and structural roots of inequality and sanctioned a psychologised view of class distinctions in terms of personal qualities' (Gillies 2005): where social problems are considered insoluble, strategies of individual behaviour management, encapsulated by the tendency towards 'parent-blaming', are considered the primary goal of policy.

4.3 For all the reasons that officials are attracted to strategies of parent-blaming, it was not surprising to see this technique emerge as part of the response to the riots – for example, in the Prime Minister's scapegoating of 120,000 'troubled families'. However, as the media analysis above indicates, on this occasion 'poor parenting' was situated within a comprehensive list of the ills of the modern age, with the riots a product of, as one newspaper's analysis put it, 'a perfect storm of school holidays, rising living costs, warm weather, cautious police tactics, rolling TV news and social media, [alongside] deep-seated social and cultural problems, including poverty, failing schools, gangs, joblessness, materialism and poor parenting'. ^[19]

4.4 While attempts to project lack of parental authority as the single cause of the riots were one-sided and simplistic, fatalistic accounts that subsumed parenting into a random mass of social and cultural problems also evaded a genuine attempt to grapple with the issues at stake. The 'missing discourse' of the riots was one that would attempt to contextualise the problem of parental authority within social and cultural developments of recent decades. In the following section, I look to the sociological literature on parenting culture to elucidate this 'missing discourse', which I would describe as one of a generalised crisis of adult authority and intergenerational responsibility.

The slow demise of adult authority

4.5 Anxiety about out-of-control youth is not a new phenomenon. Historians have noted a particular peak in this anxiety in the immediate postwar period, when anxieties about the emergence of the 'teenager' developed as a particular law-and-order problem in the form of 'juvenile delinquency'. Alongside anxieties about delinquent youth, there were also concerns about the decline of the authoritative adult, and the consequences of this for failing to contain problems (Mays 1961; Gillis 1974). Yet although, in the 1950s, there was a fear that adults were not quite capable of keeping all the young people in check, there remained a sense that the 'rebels without a cause' were a minority who could, and should, be brought under control. Despite the often bleak view of adult society at that time, there remained a clearly-understood distinction between adults and children, and a view that adult society needed to sort its own problems out, rather than indulge the lashing-out of its youth.

4.6 In his seminal (1977) work *Haven in a Heartless World: The family besieged*, the American cultural historian Christopher Lasch analysed the gradual invasion of the family by the combined forces of commercialisation, medicalisation and therapy culture. By the third quarter of the twentieth century, this had resulted in a situation where 'The citizen's entire existence has now been subjected to social direction, increasingly unmediated by the family or other institutions to which the work of socialisation was once confined' (Lasch 1977: 14). For Lasch, the decline of authority within the adult community at large was both mirrored and exacerbated by the erosion of parental authority within the family, where agencies and cultural influences external to the family were taking on increasing aspects of the socialisation process. This resulted in a 'growing gap between discipline and affection' in the American family at that time, where discipline became outsourced, becoming a function properly exercised by authorities external to the family.

4.7 Lasch's analysis emphasises the problem that arises when the authority of the mother or father appears just like the authority of a teacher, a politician or a boss, in that it has to be earned, and that it can and should be questioned: 'Parents refrain from arbitrarily imposing their wishes on the child, thereby making it clear that authority deserves to be recognised as valid only insofar as it conforms to reason' (Lasch 1977: 174). In this regard, he points to a fundamental difference between relations within the family and those within the rest of society. Family relations are implicit, affective, emotional, physical; parental authority is all-encompassing in a way that official diktat never can be. That is why the phrases 'I'll tell your mum' or 'wait 'til your father gets home' have historically had far greater import with children than being given detention at school or told off by a policeman for throwing stones at derelict buildings. It is also why the phrase 'Because I said so!' has been used by parents to win arguments with children – an assertion that would be unreasonable when used in a disagreement between adults. In the context of 2011 and its aftermath, arguably one of the clearest indicators of the triumph of a normative middle-class parenting style over the traditional exercise of parental authority is the extent to which this phrase, 'Because I said so!', is routinely used by parenting 'experts' as the exemplar of 'what not to say', in the same way as smacking is held up as the exemplar of 'what not to do' – with the only permissible alternative being a form of non-physical reasoning with a child, as though the parent-child relationship is one of equal citizens.

4.8 In Lasch's analysis, the anti-authoritarian temper of the 'permissive society' presents the weakening of parental authority as a liberating, progressive trend; yet its consequence is the opposite. The undermining of tacit, parental authority, in his view, leads to a demand for a more authoritarian state, where 'The demand for law and order, which at first sight appears to attempt a restoration of moral standards, actually acknowledges and acquiesces in their collapse. Law enforcement comes to be seen as the only effective deterrent in a society that no longer knows the difference between right and wrong' (Lasch 1977: 187). This insight appeared prescient in the aftermath of the 2011 riots, particularly with regard to the way that the apparent inability of the police to act authoritatively and contain the initial disruption led to a discussion about the need for more direct, technical means of enforcing social control, such as water cannon, plastic bullets and other violent tools. 'Shoot them. I would be in favour of shooting them. I would be in favour of plastic bullets,' Kelvin MacKenzie, former editor of the *Sun* newspaper, told *Newsnight*, after declaring that the looters were 'vile people who have had no discipline at home, no discipline at school'.^[20] But the attraction for some of authoritarian responses failed to engage with the depth of the crisis of adult authority that was manifested by these events.

4.9 In response to the riots, some politicians and commentators articulated the idea that, because of the alleged weakness of parental discipline, stronger intervention by the forces of law and order would be necessary. However, as the above analysis suggests, a better-armed or organised police force could not have simply stepped in to the vacuum left by the absence of parental authority, as its own strength is compromised by the generalised confusion over the generational responsibility of adults for children. In this case, the weakness of adult authority underpinned equally the problem of parental discipline, the authority of adults in the community, and the authority of the institutions of the state. It is to a discussion of the relationship between adult authority and parental authority that I now turn.

Intensive parenting

4.10 The period of 'late modernity', running from the 1970s through to the present day, has been characterised as a period in which 'a number of the key assumptions and building blocks which underpinned the post-war state began to be severely challenged' (Parton 2006: 25). One of the key shifts of this period took place in relation to the culture of child-rearing, with the rise of the orthodoxy of 'intensive parenting' and a reconfiguration of relations of authority both within the family, and between the

4.11 Sharon Hays's book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996: 4) coined the term 'intensive mothering' to describe the contemporary orthodoxy: 'a commitment to emotionally demanding, financially draining, labour-consuming child-rearing'. In Hays's analysis, the normalisation of maternal employment has not been accompanied by an increased sense of social responsibility for the care of children, but its opposite: an ever-more individualised obsession with the minutiae of 'parenting', in which parents (especially mothers) are expected to spend more and more time and energy directly nurturing their children, against a backdrop of dire warnings about the consequences for their child's physical and emotional health and development should they adopt a more relaxed approach. One consequence of intensive mothering is an increasing privatisation of child-rearing responsibilities, where adults other than parents are conceived of as lacking both the ability and the right to play a role in the rearing of the younger generation. Lareau (2011) has described the strategy of 'concerted cultivation' used by parents in an attempt to transcend the inequalities of class and race, with a similarly individualising effect.

4.12 Furedi (2001) argues that the trend towards the intensification of parenting does not affect mothers only, but rather represents a reconfiguration of the adult-child relationship. The orthodoxy of 'child-centredness', where parental responsibilities are organised around the (presumed) needs and desires of the individual child rather than the priorities of the family as a whole, is a consequence of what Furedi calls 'the emptying-out of adult identity' (Furedi 2001: 101–2). Here, the increasing tendency to fetishise parenting, turning child-rearing into a series of tasks prescribed by 'experts' external to the family, disorients adults and discourages them from making decisions and commitments based on their own experience and engagement with the world. This exacerbates the problem of parental authority, as 'good parenting' becomes understood as looking outside of the family to another authority figure for guidance on how to raise one's own children.

4.13 The promotion of deference to a source of external authority on everyday matters of child-rearing utilises a model that is strongly classed, reifying middle class practices and resources as the norm and ideal. It also promotes a heteronormative set of behaviours and practices (Taylor 2009, 2010; Gillies 2008a, 2008b): for example, in the policy assumption that the phenomenon of 'dadlessness' leads to an absence of appropriate 'male role models', which needs to be rectified through family intervention projects. Policymakers in recent years have taken care to recognise the diversity of family forms, and to promote authority figures (such as 'peer educators') working in community settings (such as schools and Children's Centres) who appear less 'aloof' than the professionals (doctors, teachers) promoted as authority figures in previous eras. However, the particular ideas about 'good parenting' that are promoted, combined with parents' own perceptions of parenting 'experts', indicate the trajectory is a cultural, normative shift, to do with policymakers trying to affect what people *ought* to do, rather than a reflection of a spontaneous turn towards external sources of support.

4.14 As Edwards and Gillies (2004) show, parents remain more likely to turn to family and friends for advice about child-rearing issues, and 'norms about parenting support are related to parents' differential social positioning regarding gender, class and ethnicity'. Jensen's work on parents' engagement with the 'reality TV' parenting expertise programme *Supernanny* similarly indicates the extent to which particular (classed and gendered) norms are promoted by the programme, and parents' interactions informed less by a literal desire to pick up expert advice than by a more diffuse and 'ambivalent' process of identity work, rooted in cultural ideas about 'good' and 'bad' parenting (Jensen 2009, 2010, 2013).

4.15 The privatisation of parenting, and the turn towards expertise, both occur against a backdrop of individuation and a heightened perception of risk. In this context, parents are situated as both the *only* individuals that are able to protect their children from myriad harms, and the individuals *most likely* to be responsible for causing negative outcomes (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Furedi 2001; Hunt 2003; Parton 2006). Meanwhile, adults in general are posed as a 'risk factor' in relation to children, with the state posed as the source of 'child protection'. This is starkly exemplified in contemporary Britain, where one consequence of the undermining of tacit forms of authority – that of parents, primarily, but also that of adults within the community – has been that the only people who are permitted to exercise discipline over children increasingly seem to be those who have been specifically charged by the state with this task, and trained accordingly. Thus teachers, probation officers, social workers and community co-optees who have undergone police checks and attended training courses are presented with a badge of authority, designed to signal that they are to be trusted and that they should be obeyed; while on a broader cultural level, anyone who falls outside the sphere of official regulation – parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbours, family friends, residents of a community – is warned, by a combination of cultural norms and the direct threat of sanction, to hold back (see Piper & Stronach 2008; Furedi & Bristow 2010).

4.16 As noted above, the problem of parental authority in the immediate aftermath of the riots was most clearly expressed in parents' complaints about how they felt disempowered in their ability to discipline their children. Having been told by social services and other official agencies that the only permissible forms of discipline were those associated with 'positive parenting' – in other words, praise and persuasion, which are arguably not forms of discipline at all (Reece 2013) – they felt helpless to control their children when they perceived a problem with their behaviour. The ensuing debate about which discipline techniques are permissible and/or effective unfortunately failed to engage with the deeper problem, which is that *any* form of parental discipline needs to be underpinned by a broader sense that it is adults who make the rules, and that it is right for them to impose sanctions when things go wrong. For parents to exercise authority, there has to be a *presumption* of parental authority. It is this presumption that appears to have been undermined by the combination of a culture of intensive parenting and the normalisation of expert intervention into the family.

Conclusion: Reverberations from the 2011 riots

5.1 In this paper, I have combined insights from empirical research into the media coverage of the 2011 riots with sociological literature on parenting culture and policy, to indicate the gap between media and policy discourses and assumptions about parenting, and the historical trajectory of policy that has effectively, and gradually, undermined the ability of adults to play an authoritative role. The analysis of the discourses circulating in the wake of the 2011 riots presented here reveals a sentiment of unease about the extent to which parental authority has been undermined by recent developments in parenting culture and policy, yet an unwillingness by those who articulate this unease to follow the logic of their

insight. Thus, a recognition that parenting policy 'has not worked' and that parents feel 'disempowered' by prescriptive advice on how to raise and discipline their children tends to lead to calls for better versions of the same policy, with official interventions posed as the solution to the problems caused by official interventions.

5.2 A review of the historical and sociological literature on the question of adult authority indicates that the problem is more complex, and that the destabilising consequences of parenting policy into assumptions of intergenerational responsibility should be more centrally addressed. It appears that the demise of the notion of the family as an autonomous 'haven in a heartless world', which Lasch discussed almost four decades ago, has accelerated in the recent period. Rather than being the recognised heads of their households, policy now situates parents as mediators in the relationship between the child and the state, with the family much more explicitly recognised as 'an instrument of government' (Parton 2006: 14); and policy works together with cultural norms to indicate to parents that their primary responsibility is not to do right by their child but to show that they are doing the right thing according to the current parenting orthodoxy (Furedi 2001; Bristow 2009). The effect of this has been to disorient both parents and children, as both question the basis for parental authority; and the undermining of parental authority both reflects and increases the struggle of all adults to impose authority in times of crisis.

5.3 From a sociological point of view, what is interesting about the mainstream media's analysis of parenting culture and the riots is less its limitations – which might be expected, as a reaction to an immediate event that has a number of rapid reverberations – than the extent to which certain 'common sense' observations were made at that time that, previously, had rarely been aired outside of critical scholarship about parenting policy, and have subsequently not been discussed a great deal in mainstream discourse. For example, the problematic relationship between parenting expertise and support, which promotes a particular 'positive parenting' model, and parents' confidence in applying discipline to their children was raised in a way that might warrant further policy discussion of this tension – yet there has been relatively little. Similarly, despite the visible crisis of adult authority over teenagers out on the streets, the Coalition government's policy trajectory of 'early intervention' into the lives of babies and toddlers within their homes to continue apace, with little attention paid to the disconnect between the problems facing (and caused by) youth on the cusp of adulthood and a policy obsession with children just born, who have in the main neither experienced nor caused any problems at all.

5.4 Where, in different times, an event such as the 2011 riots might have led to a wider critique of such social policy contradictions, today's highly individualised culture is more likely simply to feed an inchoate concern about parents and 'parenting', with the result that expensive, destabilising, 'parent-blaming' initiatives tend to be welcomed in the absence of any other ideas. For sociologists, this means an urgent task of continuing research and analysis about the social and cultural trends that lay beneath events of 2011, in particular by looking beyond the dominant policy and media discourses to understand better how certain policies have intersected with parenting practices to exacerbate some of the problems they set out to address.

Notes

¹Rioting and the slow-motion moral collapse of Britain, PM.' By Tim Shipman. *Daily Mail*, 15 August, 2011

²UK riots: David Cameron confronts Britain's "moral collapse". By James Kirkup, Tom Whitehead and Andrew Gilligan. *Daily Telegraph*, 15 August, 2011

³PM to make life 'hell' for gangs.' By Marie Woolf. *The Sunday Times* (London), 14 August, 2011

⁴Cameron war on feckless families.' By Tim Shipman and Kirsty Walker. *Daily Mail*, 16 August, 2011

⁵Cameron pledges to turn round 120,000 "troubled" families.' By Robert Winnett. *Daily Telegraph*, 16 August, 2011

⁶UK riots: David Cameron confronts Britain's "moral collapse". By James Kirkup, Tom Whitehead and Andrew Gilligan. *Daily Telegraph*, 15 August, 2011

⁷Cameron and Miliband go head to head over riots.' By Allegra Stratton. *The Guardian*, 15 August, 2011

⁸We can turn things around for the better.' By Ed Miliband, *The Mirror*, 16 August, 2011

⁹Front: The riots: Policing and politics: Politics: Miliband pledges inquiry into riot causes.' By Patrick Wintour and Dave Hill. *The Guardian*, 13 August, 2011

¹⁰Broken society promises.' By Jason Beattie, *The Mirror*, 16 August, 2011

¹¹Society: Are the tensions of earlier decades still smouldering?' By Matthew Connolly. *The Guardian*, 17 August, 2011

¹²Front: The riots: "The mother had problems, dad was gone. A gang had taken over the flat": What is life like for the 120,000 families the PM plans to target? And how could "family intervention" help them?' By Randeep Ramesh and Martin Wainwright. *The Guardian*, 16 August, 2011

¹³Good parenting starts in school, not at home; Support the best teachers and they will give us the mothers and fathers that we need.' By Alice Thomson. *The Times* (London), 17 August, 2011

¹⁴Front: The riots: Parenting: "Being liberal is fine, but we need to be given back the right to parent". By Amelia Gentleman. *The Guardian*, 11 August, 2011

¹⁵Society: Are the tensions of earlier decades still smouldering?' By Matthew Connolly. *The Guardian*, 17 August, 2011

¹⁶"If this was a social reaction, it was a social reaction to the need for Gucci jeans". By Anushka Asthana. *The Times* (London), 13 August, 2011

¹⁷"If this was a social reaction, it was a social reaction to the need for Gucci jeans". By Anushka Asthana. *The Times* (London), 13 August, 2011

¹⁸'Good parenting starts in school, not at home; Support the best teachers and they will give us the mothers and fathers that we need.' By Alice Thomson. *The Times* (London), 17 August, 2011

¹⁹Riots Q&A: What really happened? And, what happens next?' *Independent*, 14 August, 2011

²⁰Cited in: 'Why, oh why? The week the pundits ran riot; The disorder of recent days has provoked a torrent of pontificating from the nation's opinion formers. Here is a sample from across the political spectrum.' By Tom Peck. *Independent*, 12 August, 2011

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