Greetings,

Earlier this year you participated in a study about the riots which happened in Cronulla, and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings. The study was administered by Fiona Barlow under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3346 9515, by emailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, McElwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies that we’ve done on how people interpret social events at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: FACTORS INFLUENCING BELIEF IN AND TRANSMISSION OF RUMOURS ABOUT THE CRONULLA RIOTS.
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR
This study built on a series of previous investigations, looking at how people evaluate riots such as the Redfern, Macquarie fields and Palm Island riots. We were interested in what happens when there are different versions of a conflict that people can choose to believe. We compared rumours that emphasized the role of problems in the community in starting the riot (drunk people or criminals) with rumours that focused on external factors (poverty, police behaviour). In previous studies, for riots in Aboriginal communities people who had more positive attitudes to Aboriginals tended to believe the rumours suggesting that external factors were more influential in causing the riot. People who were more positive to authority were more likely to believe that problems in the community were causes, and more likely to mention rumours about community problems in conversation. Importantly, believing rumours that the riot was caused by community problems was then associated with supporting punitive riot prevention strategies like “making an example of rioters with jail terms”. Believing rumours that the riot had external causes, in contrast, was linked to strategies like supporting “social programs for minorities”. These findings are a good example of how when people hear conflicting stories about events, pre-existing views and identities influence what they believe, what they talk about, and how they react.

Earlier this year, there was another riot at Cronulla in Sydney. There were riots at the beach followed by more rioting and property damage for “payback”. One interesting aspect was that these incidents involved both White rioters and rioters of Lebanese/Middle Eastern heritage. So it seemed like a good chance to look again at how racial attitudes play a role in what people believe about riot origins. What we did was recruit participants in a study on beliefs about Aboriginal Australians to also complete a questionnaire on the Cronulla riots.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
During March 2006, 94 people completed the study. All participants were students from UQ, and were first year psychology students participating for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 43 (but 75% were younger than 20), and were predominantly female (83%). Most were White/European Australian (81%), or Asian/Asian-Australian (12%) with the rest associating with other heritages (e.g., South American, Middle Eastern).
WHAT WE FOUND

1. PRE-MEASURES. First we took pre-measures of attitudes towards hierarchical values and positivity to authority. Most people rejected hierarchical values (92%) and were either suspicious of authority (46%) or ambivalent about it (42%). Overall the more negative people were about authority, the more they rejected hierarchical values.

2. EVALUATION OF RUMOURS. We asked people if they had heard, passed on, and believed rumours about the Cronulla riots, about how much race played a role, how much they trusted different people involved in the riots, and how the riots should be prevented in the future. On average, people had heard five or six of the rumours, and about half of people had talked about at least one rumour. Most people favoured a community oriented approach to preventing future riots, emphasising strategies like increasing education and employment opportunities, and rejecting anti-community attitudes like bulldozing government subsidised housing. However, the majority of respondents also thought that the police should deal directly and immediately with incidents such as this, punishing rioters and those who encourage them. Overwhelmingly, people thought that the Cronulla riots reflected racial tensions, with most people suggesting that emotions about race motivated both the White and Lebanese/Middle Eastern rioters. People trusted the police and community leaders more than the people involved in the riot or the media.

We then compared rumours that linked the riots to the White community, with rumours that linked the riots to the Lebanese/Middle Eastern community, and rumours that blamed external factors (e.g., poverty, hot weather). People were more likely to have heard rumours that blamed the Lebanese community than rumours that linked the riots to the White community. Rumours about external factors were heard the least often. In general, people talked about and believed rumours about community problems causing the riots (about both Lebanese and White communities) more than they talked about and believed external reasons about the riots. People stated that they believed community reasons were the reasons for the riots more than they thought external factors caused the riots.

3. WHAT PREDICTED HEARING, BELIEVING AND TALKING ABOUT DIFFERENT RUMOURS, AND WHAT DID THAT LINK TO? Basically, people who were more positive to authority reported hearing more rumours about the bad behaviour of Lebanese/Middle Eastern Australians, either from the news or from their friends. This shows how people with different views partially access different media sources, and different social circles. These people were also more likely to believe the rumours about bad behaviour by Lebanese people, and to think that these were reasons behind the riots (even after the fact that they had heard more of these rumours had been controlled for). This suggests that people who are more positive towards authority are more easily convinced that the actions of Lebanese Australians were the cause of the riot.

Generally, people passed on rumours about bad behaviour by White or Lebanese rioters if they thought they were true, but regardless of whether they thought they actually caused the riots or not. Interestingly, for rumours about external causes (such as pre-existing poverty and hot weather), people felt free to discuss these rumours regardless of whether they thought they were true or not, or whether they believed they had a role in the riot or not.

The more people believed that community problems caused the riots (e.g., bad behaviour by either White or Lebanese Australians), the more they supported harsh deterrence approaches as prevention strategies for future riots. The more people believed in external causes, the more they favoured alternative strategies like increasing education/employment opportunities.
These findings are like previous studies, in that they suggest that when people hear conflicting stories about events, pre-existing views influence not only what they believe, but then what they talk about and how they react. This is an example of how racial attitudes, as well as views about authority and values, shape how we interpret and then react to conflicts in society.

CONCLUSION

The study of rumours in psychology hasn’t generally been approached in terms of social values and group conflicts, and the group conflicts people haven’t looked at rumours much at all. Social research looking at group dynamics in how rumours spread is pretty new. But conversations about what happened for social conflicts and why can perpetuate positive and negative views and acts towards social groups. So we’re pretty excited about following up this approach in future research.

THANKS AGAIN…

So that’s a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!