Greetings,

Back in the first semester, you participated in a study about perceptions of the causes and prevention of riots, 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. Sorry about the long delay in sending out this summary! Normally we try to write up within weeks of the data collection, but a combination of illness, overseas trips, and work in the second semester resulted in a few months’ delay.

The study was conducted 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 e-mailing 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 political decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: FACTORS INFLUENCING BELIEF IN AND TRANSMISSION OF CONFLICTING RIOT RUMOURS
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR. This study built on one that we ran last year, looking at how people evaluated the Redfern riot. 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, criminals, or mistakes about the police) with rumours that focused on external factors (poverty, police behaviour, the youths’ deaths). Even though everybody reported they heard the roughly the same set of rumours, 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.

In the intervening year, there was another riot at Macquarie Fields that was very similar in how it started and evolved to Redfern. People in the community thought the police was to blame for youths’ deaths, but then conflicting rumours emerged that it had really been an accident versus that the police were trying to cover up their actions. One interesting aspect was that the Macquarie Fields riot featured mostly White rioters whereas Redfern featured mostly Aboriginal rioters. There had also been another riot with Aboriginal rioters, at Palm Island, linked to community suspicions about a man’s death in custody. So it seemed like a good chance to look again at how racial attitudes played a role in what people believe about riot origins. What we did was recruit participants in a study on norms (summarised at http://www2.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/wl1005_3.pdf) to also complete a questionnaire on riots. There were three versions, focusing on the Macquarie Fields riot, the Palm Island riot, and the Redfern riot.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
During March-June 2005, 238 people completed the study. All participants were UQ students, with 138 first year psychology students who participated for course credit, and 100 students from the paid participant pool, who received compensation. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 48 (but
78% were 20 or younger), and were mostly women (69%). None identified as Aboriginal; most were White/European Australian (75%), Asian/Asian-Australian (10%) or other (e.g., South American / Middle Eastern) heritages. Politically, 10% had no party preference, 29% supported the governing coalition and 61% one of the opposition parties (36% ALP, 19% Green, 3% Democrat, 3% Family First or One Nation).

WHAT WE FOUND

1. PRE-MEASURES. First we took pre-measures of attitudes to affirmative action for indigenous people in education (as an indirect measure of positivity) as well as hierarchical values, positivity to authority, and identification with their non-Aboriginal ethnic group. Overall, 17% opposed affirmative action for aboriginals, 11% were neutral, and 72% supported it. Most people rejected hierarchical values (85%) and were either suspicious of authority (49%) or ambivalent about it (38%). About 58% considered their cultural/ethnic heritage important (compared to 71% who considered their national identity as Australian important, and 94% who considered being a UQ student important). Overall the less positive people were to authority, the more they embraced egalitarian values, rejected hierarchical values, supported affirmative action for indigenous people in education, and the less they valued their ethnic/cultural heritage.

2. EVALUATION OF RUMOURS. We asked people if they had heard, passed on, and believed rumours about the 3 riots, about how much race played a role, and how the riots should be prevented in future. One third of participants were asked about the Redfern riot, one third Palm Island, and one third about Macquarie Field. On average, people had heard three or four of the rumours, and about a third 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 strategies based on harsh policing methods. None of these things varied across the 3 riots. What did differ was how much people thought race played a role. As we had expected, people saw the Redfern and Palm Island riots as more linked to race than the Macquarie Fields riot.

We then compared rumours that linked the riots to community problems (mistakes about the police, drunk people, and criminals) versus external problems (deaths of community members, police actions, poverty). For each of the three riots, people were more likely to have heard, talked about, and believed rumours that linked the riots to the police and the social environment than rumours that blamed the community. But the Redfern riot was most strongly associated with rumours about the police and the social environment, followed by Palm Island, and then Macquarie Fields.

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 fewer rumours about external causes, either from the news or from their friends. This shows how people with different views partially access different media sources, and different social circles. What was more interesting is that for the rumours that everybody heard, people with more hierarchical values and those who were more positive to authority were more likely to believe and talk about the rumours linking the riot to community problems. By contrast, those who were more positive to indigenous people were more likely to believe and talk about external causes. The more people believed that community problems caused the riots, in turn, 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 last year’s study, and show how when people hear conflicting stories about events, pre-existing views and identities influence not only what they believe but then what they talk about and how they react.

What was interesting was how the race of the rioters interacted with the kinds of rumours floating around and how people reacted. We found that when people perceived the riot as racial
(i.e., Palm Island and Redfern more than Macquarie Fields), people were more likely to believe the causes were external if they were less positive to authority. People who had positive attitudes to indigenous Australians were then more likely to talk about the rumoured external causes in conversation. By contrast those who identified more with their cultural/ethnic group were more likely to recommend a punitive, deterrence-oriented reaction to the riots when it was racial, whereas when it was a primarily White riot, ethnic/culturally-identified participants were just as lenient as those who didn’t identify strongly. 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. So 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!