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Article

**Engaging political histories of urban uprisings with young people: the Liverpool riots, 1981 and 2011**

**Matthew C. Benwell[i], Andrew Davies[ii], Bethan Evans[ii], Catherine Wilkinson[iii] and Volunteers from KCC Live Community Radio Station**

*i School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, United Kingdom matthew.benwell@ncl.ac.uk*

*ii Department of Geography & Planning, University of Liverpool, Roxby Building, Liverpool, L69 7ZQ, United Kingdom a.d.davies@liv.ac.uk, bevans@liv.ac.uk*

*iii School of Education, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, L17 6BD c.wilkinson@ljmu.ac.uk*

**Abstract:**

Based on a participatory research project which involved academics and young people at KCC Live, a community radio station in Merseyside, exploring the 1981 and 2011 riots in Liverpool, UK, this paper argues that co-produced research involving young people and radio provides an under-utilised avenue for research on historical and political geographies. Working together for a year in 2012-13, the academic and non-academic participants produced a radio documentary exploring how and why the 1981 riots in Liverpool occurred, and what we could learn from those historical events to help understand the more recent 2011 riots. Young people's capacities to engage with past events that took place before they were born, in order to reflect on and understand the political present, are seldom explored in research. The research that this paper is based on therefore provides an original and significant contribution to debates on conducting research with young people, in particular developing approaches to thinking through how young people engage with, and make sense of, politics and political activity, especially disruptive or insurgent activities like riots/urban uprisings. As a result, the paper makes an important contribution to work being done on the political capacities of young people, collective histories and memories in young people's understandings of politics, place and space, and knowledges of urban uprisings. We argue that bringing children's/youth geographies into dialogue with political and historical geographies such as those discussed here is a useful avenue for future research.

**Keywords:** riots, urban histories, politics, UK, young people, radio

**Introduction**

In August 2011, following the police shooting of a black man, Mark Duggan, in Tottenham, rioting/uprisings[i] broke out in London and subsequently other English cities. In Liverpool, uprisings occurred at the same time that the city was commemorating the 30th anniversary of events in the Liverpool 8 area of the city in 1981, commonly referred to as the 'Toxteth Riots'[ii]. As Frost and Phillips (2012) have argued, despite popular claims that the 2011 riots in Liverpool were unique in their 'meaninglessness' (given the apparent absence of a local 'incident' responsible for sparking the uprisings, as was the case in Tottenham and historical urban uprisings in London and Liverpool), there are strong parallels between the 1981 and 2011 uprisings (also see Newburn, 2015), as we discuss below. Nevertheless, in both 1981 and 2011, responses from politicians and the media initially used depoliticised narratives of the uprisings. In 2011 these narratives centred on looting and in both 1981 and 2011, media coverage presented the riots as the actions of a 'criminal underclass', and 'feral' young people (Frost and Phillips, 2011; Tyler, 2013a).

Several authors have demonstrated the value of looking at historical urban uprisings and the discourses surrounding them to better understand more recent events (Frost and Phillips, 2012; Newburn, 2015). In this paper, we engage with these historical sources and stories of riots *with* young people who have regularly been at the heart of societal anxieties fixated on their presence in urban space and their role in urban uprisings. We draw inspiration from Nayak and Kehily (2014: 1332) by considering how young people can 'talk back' to predominant media representations in ways that can facilitate critical interrogations of urban youth. We explore how collective reflection (by academic staff and young people as co-researchers) on historical events and their representation in the media, can usefully inform

understandings of contemporary political issues such as the 2011 riots. In doing so, this paper reflects on a participatory research project in which young volunteers engaged with media representations and stories of riots, as well as conducting interviews with people involved in 1981, in order to produce a radio documentary on the Liverpool riots in 1981 and 2011.[iii] The project provided space for young people to engage with historical political events from different and conflicting perspectives and to explore their varied and changing interpretations of these stories. Young people's capacities to engage with past events that took place before they were born, in order to reflect on and understand the political present, are seldom explored in research.

The young people involved in co-producing the documentary with the research team were volunteers at KCC Live, a volunteer youth-led community radio station in Knowsley, a metropolitan borough of Merseyside located around nine miles from Liverpool city centre and bordering Liverpool to the East. The communities within Knowsley are a creation of the twentieth century, largely a result of Liverpool's slum clearance and over-spill development with the borough established in the 1970s (Knowsley Council, 2012). Whilst Knowsley is separate to Liverpool, its history and current population are closely tied to Liverpool. The participants were recruited via their involvement in a Knowsley-based radio station yet many of them either live in, work, go to school, socialise, and/or have family ties to Liverpool. The paper therefore is grounded in the place-based politics of Merseyside, specifically the history of resistance and rebellion that is often enmeshed within popular discourse of the city's identity. In particular, the 1981 and 2011 riots, as uprisings that took place within Liverpool in the context of disturbances in cities elsewhere in England, allow us to move beyond

stereotypical representations of the city as a political space that is radically different to the rest of the UK (Boland, 2008).

The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. First, we outline the extant literatures that have helped shape this research, including work on: the political capacities of young people; young people's engagements with and understandings of the intersections between collective memory, politics and place; urban uprisings/riots and participatory research involving community radio. Secondly, we discuss our methodological approach to this co-produced, participatory research project, which involved close collaboration between academic and non-academic participants throughout. The nature of this collaboration varied at different points in the project according to the expertise of the various individuals involved. Third, we discuss the empirical findings of the project, in relation to two key themes: how the volunteers' perceptions of themselves, race and policing altered during the course of the project; and how the volunteers' ideas about riots and rioters evolved as they conducted the research and made decisions about the documentary they wished to produce. Finally, we conclude with some thoughts about the potential for participatory research involving community radio and young people.

**Examining representations of urban youth and riots through historical political geographies**

This paper offers an original contribution to recent work in the social sciences on young people's political capacities and competencies (Hopkins and Alexander, 2010; Kallio and Häkli, 2010; Philo and Smith, 2003; Skelton, 2010, 2013). The social studies of childhood and youth have drawn attention to the multiple ways in which young people, 'are actively engaged as political subjects and agents' (Skelton 2010: 146) and dispelled previously understood notions

of their 'intellectual and moral incompetence' (Wyness et al., 2004: 82). It has shown that far from being apathetic and disinterested, young people can interpret, engage with and actively respond to, political events in a host of different ways (e.g. Hopkins, 2007; Hörschelmann, 2008; Kallio and Häkli, 2010; Kallio and Häkli, 2013; Pain et al., 2010). However, often the biological determinism used to position youth as an inherent period of instability and transition, allows young people's dissent to be 'delegitimised as it comes to be seen only in terms of delinquency' (Hörschelmann, 2016: 365). In these instances, 'it is crucial to examine closely how young people understand and exercise conflict, protest, and dissent, how their dissent is represented in wider public discourses, and how it is responded to by state and society' (*ibid*: 364).

Indeed, the aftermath of the 2011 riots have seen concerted efforts to engage some of the main protagonists in research, including young people directly involved in the uprisings. One of the most comprehensive and ambitious of these studies interviewed 270 people who took part in the riots to understand their motivations, attitudes and experiences (Lewis et al., 2011). This study drew attention to the abounding sense of anger and frustration at people's everyday treatment at the hands of the police:

> 'In Liverpool, for example, a 23-year-old man who took part in the riot in Toxteth, when asked what the word 'gang' means to him said: "People who try and intimidate members of the public. To me the worst gang is the police though."' (*ibid:* 18)

The study also highlights the significance of race as black interviewees cited harassment and discriminatory stop and search policing measures as a significant reason for their mistrust of the police (*ibid*). The nature of the young people's grievances suggests that the riots were politicised and driven by a sense of socio-economic and racial injustice.

More broadly, as active political agents, young people have also been acknowledged in research as discerning and critical readers of the media and their representations of diverse peoples and places (Pain et al., 2010; Hörschelmann and El Refaie, 2014). Nayak and Kehily's (2014) research with working-class young men and teenage mothers demonstrates how these critical capacities can be harnessed to further interrogate representations of young people in the media as 'chavs' or 'chavettes'. Such an approach, 'departs from the conventional academic line of how chavs are represented by *others,* to engage with how young people come to interpolate *themselves* through and against these tropes and the intensities of feeling they carry' (*ibid:* 1333). As Nayak and Kehily suggest, there is considerable scope for work that moves beyond distant textual deconstruction, to engage and listen to young people's critical perspectives on media representations of youth.

Secondly, this paper extends work on histories of childhood and youth in children's geographies and the wider social sciences. Gagen (2001: 53) points out that research on children and young people in geography and the social sciences 'has tended to concentrate on current or recent childhood settings'. Broader state discourses regularly frame children and youth as futurity (Evans, 2010; Ruddick, 2007), even labelling them as 'lacking memory' in some instances (Berliner, 2005: 578). For Mitchell and Elwood (2013: 34), this is because emphasis within children's geographies is placed on 'agency or affective experiences of children' [rather than] 'longer term, intergenerational and/or structuring processes that often have great importance in children's lives and in their political formation' (also see Vanderbeck, 2008). For others, absence of historical research *with* young people has been attributed to the perceived methodological and ethical challenges of listening to young voices from the past (outlined by Gagen, 2001; Mills, 2013a, 2013b, 2017). Notwithstanding these concerns, Mills (2013b) calls on researchers to 'animate' the archive and think creatively

about how historical resources might be utilised in research in ways which do not lose sight of their political dimension. She provocatively asks, 'what a historical perspective might do to challenge conventions of working in children's geographies' (Mills, 2012: 362). Whilst several authors have illustrated that historical research can enrich our understandings of childhood and the lives of children and young people, these studies have rarely explored the *political* possibilities inherent to looking at and listening to these histories *with* young people themselves.

Yvonne Hung's (2011) research in a Harlem-based youth organisation is a notable exception as she explicitly confronts some of the historical factors underpinning social and material inequality *with/alongside* young people. She uses the concept of the 'geographical imagination' as a way to encourage young people to 'see how their personal circumstances in life are influenced by forces at larger scales, connected to the course of history, and tied to geographically specific differences in resources and power' (*ibid*: 580). In order to do this, Hung's participants interviewed older members of the community, alongside other activities, to 'understand how the places of their everyday lives are constructed and how this affects their subsequent opportunities' (*ibid*: 590). Such analyses of historical context in relation to work with children and young people from social scientists are surprisingly rare but they have political significance as Hung convincingly argues:

> 'For youth growing up in economically disadvantaged settings, it is even more urgent to facilitate opportunities in which they can reclaim their worth, reject the status quo, and level a critical gaze at societal forces that affect their communities.' (Hung, 2011: 579)

This engagement with historical testimony as a way to shed light on the politics of place with its implications for young people's understandings of place and space, has parallels with Selbin's (2010) work on the importance of storytelling to practices of resistance (storytelling

is also a common method in participatory research as identified by Kindon et al., 2007). Selbin reminds us that as a method for binding people together in social groups, stories are incredibly useful. As he puts it,

> 'Regardless of scale or situation, what binds people together is stories. More than simply connecting us, stories ... are the vehicle by which we provide an account of the past to ourselves and each other. Any such stories about the past are unavoidably in the service of the present and to a vision of the future.' (Selbin, 2010: 191)

In particular, Selbin argues that myth, memory and mimesis form key aspects of storytelling – myth and memory as almost strategic decisions about how to create and structure a story of resistance, whilst mimesis, or the ability to emulate others, remains an important driver of future struggles. There is, therefore, clear potential for geographical work to explore how storytelling plays a part in young people's place-based understandings of historical political events, and to engage young people in the telling of these stories. In this case, the importance of urban disturbances like riots and uprisings to the place-based imaginations of Liverpool as a dynamic, radical, left-wing, and 'edgy' city (Belchem and Briggs, 2011; Mah, 2014) played an important role in helping the academics and young people to situate what they learnt about the 1981 and 2011 riots within the city-region's wider imagined geographies. This in turn allowed some critical interrogation of how these imagined geographies can be contested as stereotypical or misappropriated for political gain, how they do not apply to all districts/places of a city, or how different communities experience and relate to these geographies.

The riots that broke out across six English cities (Birmingham, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Nottingham and Salford) in the summer of 2011 have now received considerable academic commentary from across the social sciences, including analyses that have looked to situate

the 2011 disturbances within broader histories of rioting to identify continuities and ruptures between contemporary and historical events (Frost and Phillips, 2012; Murji and Neal, 2011; Newburn, 2015; Solomos, 2011; Tyler, 2013a). These have emphasised the strikingly similar, 'structural, political and cultural context from which the 2011 riots emerged that bear more than a passing resemblance to the riots of the 1980s' (Newburn, 2015: 50). Both the 1981 and 2011 uprisings 'occurred against a background of economic crisis that particularly affected marginalised and disaffected communities', and which had led to rising levels of inequality, youth unemployment and social exclusion (Frost and Phillips, 2012). Although some aspects of the 2011 disturbances were clearly novel including their 'speed and malleability' (Newburn, 2015: 52) and the extent of the looting which took place (see also Lewis et al., 2011), Frost and Phillips (2012) caution against seeing the 2011 riots as simply mindless violence in contrast to historical examples. For instance, whilst the 1981 riots in Liverpool,

> 'have been viewed more sympathetically, with meanings and grievances now largely understood and accepted, and even seen as noble, the 2011 disturbances have been seen as lacking any real or legitimate grievances' (Frost and Phillips, 2012).

Indeed, media and political responses to events in 2011 were quick to de-politicise the riots by reinforcing an 'ideology of the underclass' that deliberately eschewed class politics and demonised the rioters as 'scum', 'feral' and 'benefit scroungers' (Tyler, 2013a, 2013b). Research that looks across histories of rioting, then, can effectively unsettle popular assumptions that are circulated by politicians and commentators concerning contemporary urban uprisings (Frost and Phillips, 2012; Tyler, 2013b). As Solomos (2011) argues, to avoid sweeping generalisations about young people, 'there is a need to locate the riots within their specific local and social environments and for more empirically focused research on the localities in which they occurred'. Teasing out the spatialities of riots that have occurred in

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the same city, alongside the people who live there, offers the potential to access a more nuanced politics of place that counters the predominant framings of recent events.

Research on histories of rioting has also drawn attention to the role of racial injustice and police-community relations in urban uprisings (Frost and Phillips, 2011). Whilst racial injustice has been more explicitly linked (perhaps with the benefit of hindsight) with the disturbances in the 1980s than in 2011, Solomos (2011) cautions against overlooking 'the role that race and ethnicity may have played in both the [2011] riots themselves and in shaping some of the underlying conditions in the areas at the heart of the violence'. Others have argued that police-community relations, in terms of the policing of black communities more specifically, was a trigger for the uprisings in both the 1980s and 2011 (Frost and Phillips, 2012; Lewis et al., 2011), albeit less explicitly so in Liverpool in 2011 (Frost and Phillips, 2012; Murji and Neal, 2011).[iv] Thus, there is much to be gained by reflecting on historical narratives and the changing explanations for uprisings over time as a means to consider those perspectives, as well as the stories and motivations which may be absent from dominant accounts of contemporary rioting.

Fourthly, this research adds to the small yet promising body of work on community radio and young people (for an overview of this body of work see Wilkinson, 2015). A key focus for this research has been on how community radio can empower and give 'voice' to young people from disadvantaged groups (see Bass and Halverson, 2012; Doerr-Stevens, 2011; Kelly, 2015; Marchi, 2009; Podkalicka and Staley, 2009; Wagg, 2004; Wilkinson, 2016, Wilkinson, 2018b), as well as its role in fostering intergenerational community relations (see Chávez and Soep, 2005). Both of these elements are important to our project and to the radio station involved (KCC Live) as we aimed to allow young people living in one of the most deprived areas of the

UK[v] to produce their own media representations in contrast to dominant media representations of youth, and to do so via engagement with intergenerational community memories.

This adds significantly to research on audio production with young people which, although insightful, focused on young people's lives in the present, and not on historical events (cf. Noske-Turner, 2012; Wilkinson, 2018a). Moreover, there is little research that questions what is meant by youth voice (Tacchi et al., 2009) or the presentation of youth voice as a normative ideal (Wilkinson, 2018b). Soep (2006) acknowledges that the notion of youth voice as connoting free expression, as often campaigned for by scholars, is an over-simplification. For Soep (2006: 199), use of reported speech by youth media producers results in 'crowded talk', and is underpinned by constant self and peer evaluation. In this sense, contradictory voices and interests can exist within youth media projects. Moreover, Soep and Chávez (2010) bemoan the fetishisation of youth voice by media producers and theorists as individual, authentic, and untainted expression. They argue that their text is not a celebration of youth voice; for Youth Radio, the radio station at the centre of their analysis, does not simply provide young people with tape recorders and 'give' them voice. Instead, Youth Radio encourages young people to connect with their senses and experiences of their communities and social worlds, and to interrogate and examine other points of view. As a research team we concur with Soep and Chávez (2010), who argue that scholars should not position youth voice as the outcome, yet instead consider it a starting point that advances a complex set of questions. Thus, this research involved young people from the outset as co-researchers, encouraged them to examine a range of different political and personal perspectives and the final documentary features sometimes conflicting opinions from within the research team.

**Methodology**

The project on which this paper is based involved the co-production of the radio documentary, *Young People and Stories of the Riots: Liverpool 1981 and 2011,* led by a group of young volunteers who worked at KCC Live, a community radio station based in Knowsley Community College, a further education college.[vi] KCC Live was founded in 2003 as an enrichment and work experience radio station and is youth-led in the sense that volunteer young people assume the role of presenters, producers, newsreaders, segue-technicians, music programmers and web editors. The station's target audience is 10-24 year-olds in the centre of Knowsley (although it can be picked up on FM across Liverpool and listened to online inter/nationally) and the station typically has a volunteer base of 50-200, 14-25 year-olds at any given time (KCC Live, 2007).

The participatory, co-produced nature of the documentary was key to the overall ethos of the project, focused as it was on allowing young people to speak for themselves on issues which often exclude their voices and opinions (Cahill, 2007; Higgins et al.*,* 2007). Mitchell and Elwood (2012: 800) contend that:

> 'children's incipient political formation can take root in the social spaces created through collaborative alliances and processes such as speaking, writing and mapping. Their understanding of their world and the rules and relations of power in which they are enmeshed are articulated through representations and connection'.

The collaboration between academics and young volunteers that characterised the project, allowed the young people to conduct interviews and pose questions about the histories of their city, to reflect on its representation within the media, to engage in analysis of interview

data, and to produce their own output in the form of a radio documentary. Participation in these discussions with peers, academics and members of the community with memories of the 1981 riots, heavily informed the content and production of the final documentary.

Our project relied on the expertise of 8 volunteers. The volunteers were aged between 16 and 22[vii] who all worked as DJs and/or producers at the radio station, and drew on their positionalities as young people to create a documentary based on their own interpretations of the riots.[viii] The volunteers involved were those who expressed an interest in participating having listened to an introduction to the project from the academic researchers. They were asked their opinions on the riots at the outset of the project, and then to reflect on what they felt they had learnt at the end having completed the documentary and these reflective interviews gave insight into their changing views (Cahill, 2007; Mitchell and Elwood, 2012).

Ethical approval for the project was gained from the University of Liverpool research ethics committee before the start of the empirical research, yet we remained conscious that in participatory research 'questions and issues that require ethical decision making only materialise as the collaboration between participants and researchers progresses' (Manzo and Brightbill, 2007: 39; for wider debates on the inclusion of children and young people as co-researchers, see Alderson, 2001; Driskell, 2002; Wilkinson, 2018a). Despite the challenges of convincing institutional ethical boards (which typically evaluate research projects before they begin), this 'flexible, socially responsive and emergent' approach to ethics was necessary because the young volunteers made key decisions throughout about how the project would unfold (Manzo and Brightbill, 2007: 39).[ix]

There were three principal phases of the project. Phase one saw the young volunteers engage with videos, news stories, and music related to both the 1981 and 2011 riots that were

identified by the academic researchers and presented a broad range of approaches to documenting urban uprisings[x]. They also read extracts from Frost and Phillips' (2011) text *Liverpool '81: remembering the riots* that includes the reflections of some of those involved in the 1981 disturbances, and had the opportunity to discuss this in a group with Richard Phillips. This phase of the research had two purposes. First, it served to develop young people's understandings of the 1981 riots, events that had occurred before they were born. These histories, however, were not exclusively learnt during the organised research sessions, as the young people had heard about the riots through the perspectives, memories and stories of older family members, some of whom had lived in, or near Liverpool 8 during the 1981 uprisings. Secondly, this phase involved young people analysing, deconstructing and critiquing representations of the riots and rioters in both 1981 and 2011. This encouraged the young people to reflect on these tropes and consider how they might like to represent the riots differently in their documentary.

Phase two involved the young volunteers drawing up questions for, and subsequently interviewing individuals who had direct experience of the 1981 riots. The young people were initially asked who they would like to interview and then a feasible (based on the likelihood of gaining access to the individuals concerned) list of respondents was drawn up for them to select from. Interviewees included the Chief Constable of Merseyside Police, John Murphy, who was a frontline officer in 1981; Wally Brown, a youth worker in Liverpool 8 in 1981, a lead contributor to the Gifford Enquiry (commissioned to investigate race relations in Liverpool after the 1981 riots), and principal of Liverpool Community College from 1992-2008; BBC Radio Merseyside presenter Roger Phillips; Paul Peng, who was a member of the Liverpool 8 community in 1981 and is now a community cohesion leader in Knowsley Council; and Michael Simon who, at age 14 was the youngest rioter arrested and convicted for his

involvement in the 1981 uprisings. Early sessions in this phase included training the young people in undertaking extended interviews, given most of their experience of interviewing people for KCC Live involved short 30 second 'vox pop' type interviews with members of the public. Thus, for each interviewee, we organised a planning session where generic and specific questions were drawn up, and the tasks of the interview were divided between the young people involved (at least three young people took part in every interview). Basic introductions to the ethics of undertaking qualitative research formed part of a session early on in this phase. This included discussion of informed consent and the politics of doing research focusing on community, constructions of youth and race relations, in the context of riots in Liverpool.

With around five hours of interview recordings and an enhanced collective knowledge of the riots in Liverpool, the third phase of the project saw the volunteers analyse the interview data and create the final radio documentary. After an initial session focusing on how to analyse and identify themes in qualitative data, led by the academic researchers, this phase was largely directed by the young volunteers who had expertise in the production of audio for radio broadcast. Whilst the academic collaborators had little input in the editing process and final production of the documentary (the selection of audio, its ordering and the accompanying commentary and music were all chosen by the young people), some of the academics sat in on debates and discussions that took place at this stage.

The approach we took to the research was intended to be collaborative and non-hierarchical offering the young volunteers the opportunity to choose how they wished to engage the histories of riots in Liverpool. However, as Cahill (2007: 299) points out, 'it is important to articulate more clearly what we mean by youth participation in collaborative research and to

specify the degrees of participation in our practice'. The division of labour between academic and non-academic project members and the resultant levels of participation varied throughout the project (see Kindon et al*., 2007*). The respective expertise of the volunteers or academic researchers determined who took the lead at various junctures. The academic members of the team were chiefly involved in the initial design of the project, including choosing the topic of the riots as its main focus, and the academic researchers chose the media which were analysed in phase one. Phase two of the research was more collaborative (i.e. research planning and preparation). A group planning session took place where the young volunteers considered who they would like to interview for the documentary and the academic researchers were able to provide advice on the viability of their suggestions (the academic researchers then contacted interviewees and arranged the interviews). The questions for the interviewees were drawn up in group sessions with the young people and they took the lead during interviews with academic researchers present only as observers. In phase three, the control shifted to the young people, who had far superior knowledge of how to use the software to produce radio documentaries and were able to introduce the academic researchers to some of these skills.

**Perceptions of urban youth, race and policing**

Whilst all of the volunteers were aware of the riots in 1981 mainly through the accounts of older family members, few of them had in-depth knowledge prior to starting the project. As one might expect, the young people knew more about the 2011 uprisings, although none of the volunteers disclosed having been involved directly and none lived in the area of Liverpool affected. Initial discussions at the first research meeting revealed a sense of disconnection

from the 2011 uprisings. Angie stated that, 'I don't feel affected by it but that just might be me because I don't live in L8 or anything'. However, as the discussion developed, another of the young people, Mae, expressed a sense of frustration with the increased police presence and the perceived targeting of young people in the aftermath of the riots. These early exchanges started to hint at the spatialities of urban uprisings perceived as geographically distant but, nevertheless, with direct consequences for young people living in Knowsley. This had directly affected the everyday mobilities of Mae and her friends and she reflected on the classed politics of place involved in differing levels of policing across the city:

> Mae: I don't live near Toxteth, but ever since the riots and all that in Liverpool last year there's been like loads more police in my road and area and all that and especially like with what's going on, I can't really go out with a hoody on or anything without them thinking something of me.
>
> Bethan Evans: So even though you're not there it's still affecting your life?
>
> Mae: Yeah it's like, just after the riots, I wasn't here, I was on holiday, I came back and I didn't know much about it and it was raining or something and we was just walking along the street with our hoods up and the police came and stopped us. We had nothing to do with it or anything. Just came, just cos we had hoodies on…It's like different in different parts of Liverpool as well. Cos like, I know it's not Knowsley, like in Gateacre [a relatively affluent suburb of Liverpool] and all that, it's like they're not affected at all like that. Because I went to school there, like they're not really affected by anything that happens in Liverpool. Cos it's like, they're seen as a higher class than Knowsley or something.

In this extract, then, Mae starts to reflect on the socio-economic inequalities between areas of Merseyside and the uneven geographical implications this might have for young people's encounters with the police. The concerns expressed here resonate with the sense of injustice felt by respondents involved in the 2011 uprisings, who cited discriminatory treatment at the hands of the police as an influential factor for their actions (Lewis et al., 2011; Tyler, 2013b). The personal experiences of the young volunteers became important when they were brought into dialogue with discussions about historical accounts of the 1981 riots. Having

watched archive footage and read about the events of 1981, the young people discussed

discriminatory stop and search policing measures that increased tensions before the riots and

Mae, in particular, questioned assertions that police-community relations had changed more

recently:

> Angie: Well it kind of gives an idea of the climate they were living in like unanimous hatred for the police…cos now you sort of appreciate them, you understand that they're just doing their jobs and it's the law and, you know they're just, that's just their job but then, it was very much like an us and them thing wasn't it.
>
> Ems: Imagine being though 13 and then going down alleyways in the night just to get away [from the police]…
>
> Angie: But imagine being, like a police would never stop a kid for no reason now.
>
> Ems: No!
>
> […]
>
> Cal: And particularly black kids too. There's always a lot of mention about that.
>
> Ems: Yeah, which doesn't help like, can you imagine being stopped all the time, like, you're gonna be angry and think, 'What the hell, leave me alone!'
>
> Mae: That's still around though today isn't it.
>
> Angie: Do you reckon?
>
> Mae: I think so. Especially here.
>
> Bethan Evans: Was it you Mae saying last time that you were stopped by the police?
>
> Mae: Yeah. Just like, around Huyton I think it is, it's just like general racism and all that is still about, compared to like the rest of Liverpool and it's just like, it's weird.
>
> […]
>
> Bethan Evans: Yeah. Do you know other young people that've been stopped?
>
> Mae: We *were* in a group, so that was understandable, and it was like towards the city centre, but we were still like in the estate. But it was just like, they were just going round and they just…
>
> Cal: …like stereotyping you really weren't they.
>
> Mae: Yeah, cos we were wearing hoodies up an' all that.
>
> Cal: Because you had a hood on they were thinking you were all bad.

Even though Mae's experiences led her to question the distinction some of the others made between policing 'then and now', she goes on to justify the police's actions with reference to their being 'in a group' when they were stopped. Cal, however, reflects critically on the ways that the police stereotype groups of young people wearing hoodies, constructing them as a threat with the potential to disrupt the moral order of the street (Hörschelmann and van Blerk, 2012; Skelton, 2000; Valentine, 2004). Engagement with archival footage of the 1981 riots coupled with young people's knowledge of more recent events led them to think through the effects of punitive and racist policing measures. Here, Mae makes reference to racism in Huyton, a town within the borough of Knowsley where the racially motivated murder of black teenager Anthony Walker, who was a student at KCC, occurred in 2005 and attracted national press attention. During these discussions, then, the young people considered policing and community relations in urban space by reflecting on the past and present in ways that occasionally generated tensions. The young people's varied experiences led to the expression of different views on whether policing and the regulation of public space was still a problematic issue, a reminder that there is not a singular 'youth voice' to be heard through the undertaking of participatory research and the production of community media (James, 2007; Soep, 2006). The juxtaposition of urban youth and disturbances from 'then and now' encouraged the young people to consider the nature of discriminatory measures to regulate public space, particularly the intersections of race and class, invoking more empathetic responses to the experiences of young black people (see Ems above).

The role of the police and inequalities in policing measures distinguished along the lines of race, class and generation emerged as key themes from the first phase of the research and were influential in the young people's choice of interview respondents and the kinds of

questions they wanted to ask. These perspectives challenged and, in some instances, changed the young people's political subjectivities encouraging more nuanced readings of the riots that are presented in the final documentary. Here we give a sense of the different accounts offered by these interviewees which were chosen for inclusion in the documentary:

> John Murphy: The fact is sadly young black youth particularly is disadvantaged and suffer very acute levels of poverty and consequently are more likely to get sucked into crime, it's not cos they're black it's because they are disadvantaged and they happen to be black so that is always going to cause a problem.

> Michael Simon: If I think about it probably from the age of 10 I got stopped and searched, I remember coming home from somewhere and just as the bus pulled up a police van pulled up and [the police] had me up against the wall.

> Wally Brown: The police used to park their jeeps on the boulevard so the kids had to go past them and the kids would often come in the youth club as they were going home and say Wally do me a favour just stand on the corner here and watch us as we walk past the police so we don't get harassed.  Now these are the police that are supposed to be protecting people and young people are asking me to protect them going past the police.

These accounts and the interviews from which they were drawn led to impassioned discussions amongst the young volunteers in the documentary about the relative importance of racist policing and class-based disadvantage as root causes for the violence:

> Dan: Going by what people said I think... I think it was a result of the police and what they were doing... I don't think it was er... racially targeted I would say because of the majority of black people being poor it was obviously targeted at poor people.

> Niloo: No not at all I don't... John Murphy said that and I absolutely don't agree with the notion that they just happened to be black and it wasn't racially motivated because from everyone you heard there was racist attitudes in the police force and erm... you know [the rioter] we spoke to him about it he lives in an area where there were black people and white people but he got the... he bore the brunt of it, it was him and his family cos they were mixed race.

> Gee: There's a lot of talk about the police being the main responsibility causing the riots and I would like to believe that it wasn't racially motivated, I would like to believe that it was more because of the social state that these people were in erm... where it happened it was a very deprived area and I think even if I was living in a deprived area and I had no job, no prospects erm... people were coming at me right, left and centre

accusing me for whatever then I think I would be pushed to a limit. (Extract from the documentary)

The direct engagement with the diverse lived histories of the 1981 riots engendered debate among the young people as they critically assessed extremely complex political questions related to class and race. Whilst there was widespread agreement that policing was a significant factor in triggering the riots (see Frost and Phillips, 2011, 2012), Dan and Niloo disagreed as to whether the police racially-targeted black communities.

These kinds of disagreements give a sense of the very real and messy entanglements with 'real world' issues that Soep (2006) and Soep and Chávez (2010) discuss in relation to youth radio projects. Rather than a unified, collective 'voice', there are multiple perspectives that are situated and incomplete. This reflects the collective and participatory efforts of the volunteers and their attempts to make sense of historical events for contemporary audiences through the negotiation of existing stories and the creation of new perspectives about them.

The young people's access to, and interrogation of, direct accounts from interviewees allowed their discussion to go far beyond unproblematised media representations of the riots and encouraged an examination of the socio-economic contexts of urban uprisings. For example, when asked at the end of the project what had most surprised her, Angie said:

> 'Well just hearing about all the police misconduct, like the police would just batter your mates and that was just normal, like I realise how different my life is to people who have to endure that kind of thing. And, kind of alerted me to the presence of a community that I've got no preconceptions about and um yeah it was really shocking to hear about how badly people were treated by the people that they were supposed to be able to trust.'

Mae explained that:

> 'I've learnt about what happened, people's different point of views and what everyone thought, what the police thought happened, what the rioters thought happened, what

community workers thought happened, and all that, so it was interesting to learn about all that.'

This project placed emphasis on listening and working directly with audio recordings of the interviews (rather than transcripts) allowing the volunteers to engage with multiple perspectives. As Tyler (2013a) suggests:

'To contest the perceptual frame of the underclass it is imperative…to revitalise the art and craft of listening which are central to ethnographic practice. This listening is taking multiple forms, such as the facilitation of conversations between sociologists [and geographers], community activists, teachers and young people.'

Through listening to different accounts, young people were able to question their existing perspectives and privilege. For example, Angie made the following reflection at the end of the project in response to a question about what she had learned:

'I don't know, I guess [I now have] less trust in the institutions that had my pretty much unquestioning trust beforehand. Um, probably other situations like now when I hear about crimes and things I'm often more prone to think about, you know what were the situations of that person's life that lead them to do this horrific thing. You know. I, it's, I think it's made me be less biased. I think I've got a broader perspective on things and I try and avoid sticking to the obvious conclusion.'

Several of the volunteers expressed frustration at what they perceived to be the sanitised and institutionalised version of events relayed to them by John Murphy, their first interviewee. As Angie explained, 'He was quite cagey'. Having subsequently talked to the other respondents, including Michael Simon, the young people wished to re-interview the police representative, pushing him further on questions about policing and racism but this was not viable due to time constraints. Notwithstanding these constraints, the decisions the volunteers took about who to interview and what questions to ask avoided the automatic problematisation of urban uprisings and instead opened up possibilities to explore different reasons as to how and why

young people were articulating dissent in 1981 (Hörschelmann, 2016). The investigation of the 1981 riots also encouraged the volunteers to make connections with, and (re)assess, contemporary political events that had occurred around them in 2011.

**Making sense of (contemporary) riots and rioters**

In a series of short interviews during our first meeting with the KCC Live volunteers, some of whom ended up not taking part in the project, profoundly negative views of riots and rioters were espoused, most especially in relation to the 2011 uprisings. These anonymous respondents aired the following opinions that were included in the opening to the documentary:

> 'How would I describe those involved [in the 2011 riots]? Urm, there's a lot of harsh words to describe those involved, I would be tempted to say misunderstood but I think it's a lot worse than that.'
>
> 'Scum, nothing but scum and horrible. They should do a life sentence or something'. (Extract from the documentary)

Similarly, initial discussions with the volunteers involved in producing the final documentary tended to reinforce stigmatising categories of the rioters as delinquents, benefit scroungers and the underserving poor (Tyler, 2013b). The volunteers were quick to distinguish themselves from the 'other' young people involved in rioting and could find little explanation or justification for their violent actions, as Angie explains in the first part of the quote below. Although the radio documentary presented the 2011 riots as being 'less political' than the 1981 riots, the interviews conducted with the volunteers upon completion of the project showed how they were more likely to consider the motivations underlying urban uprisings:

Angie: Well when I watched, when the riots were happening on the news, I just remember thinking it was horrible and not understanding why anyone would you know resort to that kind of violence and destroy communities and things, but that was a few, two years ago and I think now I understand that... I actually think that although violence is still bad, I understand why they did it, especially in '81. It's difficult, I don't know we don't have the gift of hindsight when it comes to 2011, still too recent, there's not, people aren't willing to come forward about it, there's no real stories from people who were actually involved, however, it's made me a lot more sceptical about the version of events that we're generally led to believe.

Mae: The rioters, because they just wanted their, in a way they just wanted their questions answered and they saw the only reason they could get them was by fighting out.

Whilst they did not condone the violence bound up with urban uprisings, in these final interviews the volunteers seemed more likely to acknowledge the young people as political agents who had legitimate grievances and limited means for expressing them (Hörschelmann, 2016). Angie makes some interesting observations about the media coverage and what she saw as the lack of voice given to those involved in the 2011 riots in mainstream accounts. Exploring community histories alongside young people in ways that juxtaposed conflicting and sometimes controversial perspectives seemed to encourage more discerning readings of the media coverage of the more recent 2011 riots. Many of the sessions over the course of the research project involved young people analysing archive footage of the 1981 and 2011 riots during which they questioned how issues were represented to the viewer. Angie reflected on how the rioters were represented by politicians and the media in 1981 and 2011, and how this might have played a role in stoking tensions further:

'There's enough parallels to suggest that the riots, that were so-called copycat riots you know, could have stemmed from similar situations as '81...The way the politicians were talking about what happened in the riots, it was quite patronising, quite condescending thinking about it now. It kind of de-humanised the rioters, didn't talk about them as individuals, like a solid frenzied mass kind of thing and it was more about how we're

going to deal with this as a nation. It made them into social pariahs that the rest of the UK you know have to put up with and have to clean up the mess of.'

Research conducted in the wake of the 2011 riots has drawn attention to the ways that marginalised young people (as well as the places in which they live) were stigmatised and vilified in the run up to the uprisings and the sense of alienation and frustration that this instilled (Lewis et al., 2011; Tyler, 2013). Throughout this project, the volunteers developed an understanding of these stigmatisations and sought to challenge them through the eventual radio documentary. This was a process as the above quotations show the evolution of many of the young people's ideas about how riots/rioters can be characterised. Importantly, these activities show how the volunteers were already thinking beyond and against the dominant narratives of 'lawless' and 'feral' youth of the 2011 riots that were quickly inscribed onto mainstream narratives in their aftermath. Given how the 2011 riots have become subsumed, and potentially even forgotten, in a wider British landscape of post-2008 austerity, this counter-narrative remains important and shows the potential for continued engagement with historical moments of antagonism as a mechanism for understanding the contested politics of place.

**Conclusions**

This paper demonstrates how research which critically and creatively explores history with young people in participatory ways can open up space for alternative and/or radical interpretations that may challenge dominant historical discourses/representations. We have argued that young people are not only capable of sophisticated readings of past events but can critically relate these to (the coverage of) contemporary instances of urban uprisings. The

act of looking back at the recent urban history of Merseyside alongside young people, we argue, encouraged critical perspectives on issues like racism, community-police relations and constructions of young people/rioters in urban space. This has important consequences for four areas of research: adding to research on the political capacities of young people; research on how young people engage with collective memory and politics in their understandings of place and space; expanding knowledges of riots and urban uprisings in the UK, and; extending research on the use of community radio as a critical tool for progressive political activity and research. There are no simple conclusions that stem from exploring complex political questions in participatory research of this nature (and nor should there be) but, we argue, the process of bringing young people into contact with archives and actors that present different, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations of historical events has considerable value. In particular, accessing the 'hidden archive' or what might be considered as 'non-official' accounts (by conducting interviews with rioters and youth workers, for example), encouraged the young people to think critically about historical events that had taken place in their city.

Communicating stories of political struggles is particularly important in this case as it performs a dual task. Firstly, rehabilitating and engaging with the politics of resistance as experienced by young people in the 1981 and 2011 riots allows the creation of a counter-narrative to dominant histories of these events, and allows young people the agency to deliver these stories from their own perspectives. Secondly, this has important implications for the politics of place. As detailed above, Liverpool's history makes the city an excellent arena for understanding how riots occurred according to specific local circumstances. However, following Selbin (2010), the elements of myth making and drawing from memory, and mimesis from previous struggles are important in understanding the 1981 and 2011 riots in the city. Riots in Liverpool, particularly the 1981 riots, have become almost mythic events,

however, they are within living memory. Thus, telling stories about the riots and affirming that they were a rebellion or struggle for justice, ties into wider discourses about the city struggling against authority and/or the UK state. The co-production of a participatory radio documentary involving academics, community workers and young people necessarily continued and extended these threads of story-telling about the events of 1981, and, to a lesser extent, 2011. Critically engaging with these stories, and deciding how this documentary would fit in with, or rub against these stories, formed a key part of discussions throughout the process of making the documentary. There is, we would argue, further radical potential in participatory projects that encourage individuals or small groups of (young) people to question those in positions of power and dominant discourses of riots.

Acknowledgements

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**Notes**

[i] Throughout this paper we use the terms riots and rioting when making reference to how the urban uprisings were represented and framed in the media. Our preferred terminology for these events is urban uprisings as many people in Liverpool 8/Toxteth refer to the events of 1981 as an uprising rather than a riot; this term also acknowledges the agency of those involved.

[ii] It should be noted that 'Toxteth' was a label largely seized by the non-local (i.e. beyond Merseyside) press to name the area of Liverpool that the riots took place in. 'Toxteth', for the 1981 rioters, held little meaning, and many instead preferred to refer to the neighbourhood by its postal code – 'Liverpool 8', or 'L8'. These naming issues are not matters of historical discussion, but are important in how residents continue to contest their perception by those who live outside the neighbourhood, or outside the city of Liverpool more generally.

[iii] A copy of the finished documentary is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoobCjbjnLY

[iv] Beyond the scope of this paper, but important to note here, is the long-established nature of Liverpool's black community, which pre-exists that of many other UK cities and can be traced back to the city's origins as a slave-trading port. This long-standing presence has also meant that the black population has been subject to widespread discrimination and racialized violence over a longer period than many other black populations of the UK, such as during the 1919 Race Riots – see, for example, Belchem, 2014.

[v] Knowsley is ranked highly in all measures of the Government's 2010 Indices of Multiple Deprivation. The most deprived areas are Kirkby, North Huyton and Stockbridge Village (Knowsley Council, 2012). Significantly, 9.79% of 16-18 year-olds in Knowsley are not in education, employment or training; this is one of the highest rates nationally. Within Knowsley, 97.3% of the population has a white ethnic background (Knowsley Council, 2012).

[vi] This article is being published six years after the empirical research was undertaken. Whilst this time lag means that some of the social, political and economic conditions in which this research was carried out have shifted, the unequal impacts of austerity on communities such as those in Liverpool and Knowsley, and the divisiveness of British politics, have arguably become more pronounced. In addition, recent movements such as Climate Rebellion have brought new focus to the ways young people engage with p/Politics. Whilst there is a time lag, then, the focus of this paper on the ways in which engagements with historical uprisings can inform

young people's political subjectivities and action is perhaps more important now than it was at the time. As for the reason why this paper is delayed, the increasing demands of the neoliberal academy, teaching and admin workloads combined with personal circumstances for several of the authors have meant that this paper has taken a long time to publish (an early draft having first been worked on in 2014). Moreover, as the project came to an end and the documentary was launched, the move away from thinking about the immediate work with young people to produce the documentary, to thinking about the broader implications of what the young people had done, took time for reflection. As Mountz et al (2015: 1236) explain: "Everyone has a paper tucked away somewhere that she has been working on for years. Given the chance to marinate, ideas ripen, often resulting in some of our most thoughtful, provocative, and important work. Good scholarship requires time: time to think, write, read, research, analyze, edit, and collaborate". For the last six years, this has been the process underpinning the writing of our paper.

[vii] Whilst we asked for people's age, we didn't ask the young people to categorise their gender, sexuality, disability, or ethnicity, instead working with them as individuals.

[viii] Working with young people of this age over the course of one year (the project ran from October 2012 when the project team first came together, until the broadcast of the documentary at a public event in September 2013), meant that the project team altered as people got jobs, moved away to university and had other life-course events which altered their desire to engage with the project. As a result, team numbers ebbed and flowed between meetings from a high point of eight, through to a low of three. However, six members provided key input throughout the project.

[ix] An illustrative example of the emergent ethical challenges of a participatory project of this nature is evident in our use of pseudonyms in the paper. We have used the young people's real names when quoting from the documentary as they are identified in it but use pseudonyms for other recorded exchanges that are cited.

[x] These included archival news footage of the 1981 uprisings in Liverpool from both the BBC and ITV, coverage of the 2011 riots, including responses by David Cameron and Darcus Howe, as well as music videos, particularly Plan B's song 'ill Manors'.