

YOU HAVE TO FIGHT! FOR YOUR RIGHT! TO PARTY! STRUCTURE, CULTURE, AND MOBILIZATION IN A UNIVERSITY PARTY RIOT

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ABSTRACT

This chapter integrates both structural and symbolic interactionist perspectives used in the study of collective behavior to provide a thorough examination of the campus culture and student–police interactions that precipitated a riot near James Madison University (JMU). While the analysis is anchored by Smelser’s (1971 [1962]) “value-added” model, it also accounts for cultural conditions common on college campuses. Importantly, the dynamics associated with this case may be similar to other riots – at sporting events, at religious processions, etc. – occurring when authorities disrupt gatherings that have strong cultural resonance among participants. In these cases, attempts at disruption may be seen as an assault on norms strongly associated with a group’s identity. The study also used a unique data source – 39 YouTube videos posted of the riot

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event – that made it possible to capture the interactive and emergent quality of rioting behavior in real time from multiple vantage points.

Keywords: Riot; collective behavior; policing; value-added model; Neil Smelser; elaborated social identity model (ESIM)

INTRODUCTION

On Friday evening, April 9, 2010, James Madison University (JMU) students began assembling by the hundreds at the Forrest Hills Manor apartment complex, the site that year for the annual “Springfest” block party. Previously, police and property managers had forced a change in the party venue from Foxhill Townhomes and they now acted preemptively to “shut-down” the party again. This time, the early partygoers were dispersed by police who were accompanied by a Forrest Hills property manager (Scott, 2010). Still, by 3:30 p.m. the next day, an estimated 8,000 people found their way to the block party. That afternoon, following an attempt to “politely” police the party, the event was declared an “unlawful gathering” by the local police department and a civil disturbance unit was dispatched to the party. After several dramatic skirmishes with some partygoers the police forcefully dispersed the crowd. Broken beer bottles littered the parking lot – many had been thrown at the police – and cars and apartments had been vandalized. Two large dumpster fires – fueled by furniture and debris from the party – were extinguished once fire department trucks could enter the complex. By then, police had deployed tear gas and pepper spray and arrested over 30 partygoers. According to local media, there were roughly 40 injuries to both civilians and police, including one partygoer who was stabbed in the leg (Somers and Sutherland, 2010).

One definition of riot is when “one or more persons, part of a larger gathering, are engaged in violence against person or property or threaten to so engage and are judged capable of enacting that threat” (McPhail, 1994, p. 2). The study of riots and crowd behavior emerged in the late 19th century following the publication of Gustav LeBon’s (1968 [1895]) *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. This work has since been much criticized and problematized, particularly the notion that crowd behavior causes de-individualization and the characterization of crowd behavior as contagion fueled by collective irrationality (see McPhail, 1991; Reicher 1984). Notably, after a series of American urban riots in the summer of

1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson established a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders whose findings were largely at odds with the LeBonian tradition (Waddington, 2007). Rather than “irrationality,” social conditions – grievances, frustration, negative interactions between citizens and the police, and precipitating incidents – were considered potential triggers for disorder (NACCD, 1968, p. 1–30). Not surprising, this period saw an increase in the study of race riots (e.g., Geschwender, 1964; Spilerman, 1970). Since then, prison riots (e.g., Useem, 1985), food riots (e.g., Auyero & Moran, 2007), and particularly riotous behavior during sporting events and celebrations (e.g., Armstrong, 1998; Braun & Vliegthart, 2009; Dunning, 2000; Finn, 1994; Rosenfeld, 1997; Stott, Adang, Livingstone, & Schreiber, 2007; Vider, 1999) have been investigated. Also studied are so-called “issueless” celebratory riots that have taken place at universities (see Ruddell, Thomas, & Way, 2005).

One tension in the study of crowd behavior – a question also central in social science – is the degree to which structure and agency are causal to human behavior. In this respect, the study of crowds – beginning with LeBon to the present period – has veered between social, psychological, and structural models in explaining why people assemble and sometimes riot. Notably, Neil Smelser’s (1971 [1962]) much discussed “value added” model – an approach that anchors this study – used language closely associated with the LeBonian tradition. At the same time, Smelser (1971 [1962], p. 23–66) steadfastly examined the values and norms that caused otherwise “rational” people to become “swept-up” by a craze, hysteria, or fad (e.g., speculation in the stock market). While Smelser (1971 [1962]) advanced the idea that “structural strain” is a necessary component for collective behavior, another goal outlined in *Theory of Collective Behavior* was to reconcile the tensions between different approaches to the study of collective behavior. In this respect, the 50th anniversary of the text seems an appropriate time to revisit the value-added model.

Neil Smelser’s (1971 [1962]) “value added” approach to the study of collective behavior was considered an important text, but then largely abandoned as structural functionalist orientations became less used in sociological study. While the value-added model serves as the “backbone” for our inquiry, we have also integrated the perspectives of other theorists who often regarded their approaches as mutually exclusive to Smelser’s. Practically, we had data that reinforced structuralist perspectives associated with the value-added model, and other data that reinforced perspectives associated with the interactionist approaches championed by Turner & Killian (1987 [1972]) and more recently advanced by Reicher (1984) and his

colleagues (Drury & Reicher, 2009; Drury & Stott, 2011; Drury, Stott, & Farsides, 2003; Reicher, 1987, 1996; Reicher & Potter, 1985; Stott & Drury, 2000). Social science convention largely dictated that we should “choose sides,” but we believe that combining various approaches offered the greatest explanatory potential with respect to our case.

Importantly, Smelser (1972) recognized that his model had neglected both the “internal processes” and “psychological mechanisms” of collective behavior and he was open to reconciling these problems within the model. For example, following the publication of two studies that applied his approach to the Kent State shootings (see Lewis, 1972; Rudwick, 1972), Smelser (1972, p. 98) stated, “While I made a number of explicit psychological assumptions (1971, p. 11-, 12) I have come to the conclusion that I definitely underplayed the importance of psychological mechanisms in the dynamics of episodes of collective behavior.”

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED APPROACH FOR EXPLAINING RIOTOUS BEHAVIOR

One benefit of the Smelser (1971 [1962]) approach was that it provided a way to present an integrated picture of the structural conditions that informed collective behaviors. Neil Smelser’s (1971 [1962]) value-added approach identified six variables sequenced and causal to each other. These are (1) structural conduciveness, (2) structural strain, (3) generalized belief, (4) precipitating factors, (5) mobilization, and (6) operation or failure of social control. First, *structural conduciveness* consists of social-structural characteristics that potentially facilitate or mitigate public disorder. *Structural strain* is a collective feeling of frustration that emerges when a group perceives its rights – relative to other groups – have been violated (Smelser, 1971 [1962]). The third factor, the growth and spread of a *generalized belief*, is the process whereby the source of frustration is identified and blame is assigned. This belief may cause a group to pursue some form of collective action (Brown & Goldin, 1973; Smelser, 1971 [1962]). Shared beliefs that fuel riot are not usually as deliberately crafted as those created during the social movement framing process (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Smelser (1971 [1962]) described *precipitating factors* as events providing a concrete example of generalized beliefs. Strain and belief were not always considered sufficient to generate a riot without some precipitating factor that “sparks” a riotous event (Brown & Goldin, 1973; Smelser, 1971 [1962],

1964; Waddington, 2007). This event “either magnifies and sharpens existing tensions or removes inhibiting uncertainty about the implications of a particular generalized belief” (Brown & Goldin, 1973, p. 129). Precipitating factors can cause those with grievance to plan a crowd *mobilization* that confronts those responsible for an inequity (Smelser, 1971 [1962]; Waddington, 2007). While mobilization during the context of a social movement is often highly deliberative, a high level of planning is not usually associated with rioting. Brown and Goldin (1973) argued there is often a “spiraling of emotion” fueled by rumor and/or generalized belief that causes people to act collectively, but more spontaneously compared to social movement mobilization.

The final factor in Smelser’s (1971 [1962]) model is the *operation or failure of social control*. Smelser assumed that countermeasures would be taken at various stages during a crowd mobilization and that the strategies of control available to officials were contingent upon the type and severity of public disorder (Brown & Goldin, 1973; Smelser, 1964, p. 120). For example, authorities might offer a compromise preempting mobilization, but when there is a failure of social control during the process of mobilization, authorities often respond with reactive measures that subdue a crowd through force.

The Importance of Culture in Social Structure and During Mobilization

Our account of *structural conduciveness* is largely informed by McPhail’s (1994, p. 9) work. Generally, these are the conditions that enabled students to routinely mobilize “to party” at JMU and put them into routine conflict with local police. Previously, the Smelser (1971 [1962]) model would have proscribed an examination of “norms” and “values” associated with student life, but culture can also be regarded as patterns of student behavior that help create and maintain normative values. Rather than regarding culture as something only “in people’s heads,” we saw it as symbolic relationships that could be observed in “linguistic practices, institutional rules, and social rituals” that characterized the party culture at JMU (Polletta, 2004, p. 100). As such, our account of structural conduciveness focused less on accounting for normative values of students and more on how these values are maintained and reinforced by rituals and tropes associated with the JMU party culture.

During the 2009–2010 academic year, the JMU administration and Harrisonburg police attempted to disrupt routine practices associated with

JMU party culture, which we characterize as a form of *structural strain*. One response to this strain was the reinforcement of an established *generalized belief* among some students that they had a “right” to party. In our case, we argue that a perceived assault on normative student values created conditions that made riotous behavior more likely. In this case, the attack on student values became more resonant when police attempted to disrupt an annual block party. This was a *precipitating factor* that helped turn the party – an annual event for roughly a decade – into a riot. Notably, following the introduction of the value-added approach, Marx (1970) and McPhail (1971) argued that “grievance” and “strain” did not appear evident with respect to celebratory and other issueless riots. With respect to our case, we think that strain and grievance – conceptualized differently than Smelser might have – were causal with respect to this particular celebratory riot.

Attempts to disrupt annual events – religious traditions, sporting events, cultural gatherings – are common. Many of these traditions – “periodic assemblies” as defined by McPhail and Miller (1973) – are also *mobilizing structures* built into a culture. Participation in these traditions often has considerable meaning and resonance to participants. For example, the close associations that people have with sports teams, and how these associations can precipitate routine acts of riotous behavior, have become a focus of study in Europe (see Stott, Adang, Livingstone, & Schreiber, 2007) and sometimes explored by scholars in the United States (see Lewis, 2007). Attempts at disrupting these events or the establishment of overt forms of control – by authorities or competing groups – may often be a precipitating factor that helps enable riot events. In the case of Springfest block party, once there was an attempt to disrupt the event the party became both the “cause” and the “structure” around which the crowd was mobilized (see McKay, 1998).

The Interactive Quality of Riotous Behavior: Extenuating Circumstances and the Failure of Social Control

During our examination of the final variables of the value added model, *extenuating circumstances* and the *failure of social control*, we discuss the emergent quality of rioting behavior (McPhail, 1994; Turner & Killian, 1987 [1972]). We think much of this behavior was enabled, and also patterned, by a shared student identity (see Drury & Stott, 2011; Reicher, 1984). Indeed, the shared association that students have with JMU – its designation as a “party school,” for example – made it easier to fashion collective grievances

against the JMU administration and community police who were trying to curtail excessive drinking.

Importantly, we had access to unique data – 39 YouTube videos of the riot event – which allowed us to observe the riotous event from multiple perspectives as it unfolded. This offered a unique opportunity to describe, in a detailed manner, the emergent quality of riot behavior. For example, Turner and Killian (1987 [1972]) have noted that during riots people actively try to “make sense of” what they are observing around them – and that in confusing situations people constantly evaluate others’ behaviors in order to figure out what is normative. Similarly, McPhail’s (1994) sociocybernetic approach assumes that participants gather information from multiple “feed-back” loops they use to assess and re-assess ongoing events. Notably, Reicher (1984) extended interactionist perspectives while crafting the social identity model (SIM) that was further “extended” (ESIM) by others (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Stott & Drury, 2000; Stott & Reicher, 1998). Generally, the ESIM approach is anchored to landmark findings in the field of social psychology, particularly the process of “self-categorization” within the context of groups (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). In this regard, people define themselves as individuals, but during this process they also craft comparative identities in which they “self-categorize” themselves with groups of people they regard as similar or like-minded. Further, these personal and collective associations often determine the options available when people decide to act collectively. It also determines who feels an affinity with a certain type of collective action, so much so that as observers they may even be inspired to join a group.

The Failure of Social Control: Police–Student Interactions

Criticism of how Smelser characterized *extenuating circumstances* and *social control* are common. He tended to focus on the reactive measures taken by authorities after a situation was “out of control” and neglected how styles of policing can help precipitate, prevent, change, or worsen a riot event (Waddington, 2007, p. 41; Waddington, Jones, & Critcher, 1989, p. 174–177). Practically, since the introduction of the Smelser model there are indications that the policing of crowds has changed dramatically. Many have argued that the police, since the period of the 1960s, have been trained to use less confrontational methods when policing crowds and protesters (see McCarthy & McPhail, 1998). Still, the size of a protest events and the threat posed to the police are still closely associated with the decision to use

force against civilians (see Earl et al., 2003; Earl & Soule, 2006). In fact, Soule and Davenport (2009, p. 1) have argued that “the character of the protest event and the threat to police” are the most important variables that predict the use of force against protesters.

Directly related to our inquiry is a study by McCarthy, Martin, and McPhail (2007) that compared police reactions to campus protest events and campus gatherings that were “convivial” in nature. Convivial events would include the Springfest block party studied in this paper. Their primary concern was whether police responded differently to threat based on the composition of the crowd. Like previous studies, they found both the size of the gathering and the threat to police (i.e., physically confrontational behavior) were associated with the use of police force. But, protest events are more tightly coordinated and police respect “first amendment” rights, so there was a tendency to use less force when policing these types of events. Important to our study was the finding that aggressive policing directed toward convivial campus gatherings was more common:

Police in campus communities across the United States have struggled in responding to this new kind of disorderly gathering, and ... are much more likely to use the aggressive tactics of making arrests or employing tear gas or pepper spray and riot batons to disperse disorderly convivial gatherings, as compared to protest events; these features are reminiscent of the “escalated force” approach that previously characterized police responses to protest disturbances during earlier periods. (McCarthy et al., 2007, p. 292)

The Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM) and Policing

The ESIM approach has been developed by scholars studying both protest events and large convivial gatherings – soccer hooliganism is commonly studied – that often involve routine interactions with police. In particular, Reicher and his colleagues (Stott & Drury, 2000; Stott & Reicher, 1998) extended the ESIM approach while investigating the “poll tax riot” that took place at Trafalgar Square in London. In this case, roughly 250,000 peaceful protestors participated in an event that, following a series of police–protester interactions, resulted in a considerable amount of violence between these groups. As stated previously, ESIM approaches assume that people self-categorize and act collectively with those who are similar. This both constrains and enables certain behaviors in a crowd context. In this case, nonetheless, some members of an ostensibly peaceful protest group ultimately battled with police. Afterwards, many others in the crowd later condoned this behavior. Why did this happen?

The poll tax riots provided an opportunity to think about how identity can shape action within groups, but also how group interactions shift what is considered acceptable behavior (see [Stott & Drury, 2000](#); [Stott & Reicher, 1998](#)). Indeed, ESIM theorists now presume that mobilizations are often inter-group encounters. Often, these groups interpret the same behavior in different manners. For example, the Trafalgar conflict seems to have escalated when protesters engaged in a “sit-down” strike on a busy street. The protesters regarded this as a legitimate form of protest, but many police interpreted the act as a “threat to both public safety and public order” ([Drury et al., 2003, p. 1501](#)). The interpretation of an act as illegitimate by a powerful group can often precipitate a spiraling of conflict, making it more likely that the use of violence becomes legitimate. [Drury et al. \(2003, p. 1501\)](#) state: “conflict can arise where (a) there is asymmetry between the way in which social location is seen by crowd members themselves and by out-group members And (b) the out group has the power to enact its understanding over and against the resistance of crowd members.” Similar to ESIM approaches is the “flashpoints” model of public disorder developed by [Waddington and colleagues \(Waddington 1987, 1992, 1998; Waddington, Jones & Cricher, 1989\)](#). Like ESIM, the model highlights how differing definitions of the situation by in-group and out-groups (e.g., the police) increase the likelihood of conflict ([Waddington et al., 1989](#)).

With respect to the ESIM model, there is a high level of group resonance associated with being a college student. Indeed, college life is a period when people often form intense associations with “their school,” and routine patterns of student life – the rallies, the sporting contest, etc. – act to reinforce these associations. As this paper will make clear, many JMU students – even as they engaged in behavior others at the event characterized as self-destructive and dangerous – did not regard their partying as a violation of social norms. Indeed, within the context of their primary associations many regard excessive partying as a legitimate mode of student expression. In short, for many students the party culture at JMU is what makes the university great (see [Vander Ven, 2011](#)). Notably, this normative value became increasingly at odds with those of the JMU administration and local police in the period before the Springfest riot.

DATA AND METHODS

Like others, we found applying the Smelser model was largely a qualitative endeavor best suited to a descriptive case study methodology (see [Lewis,](#)

2007). Many of the data for this study were collected by the JMU administration and the Harrisonburg, Virginia, Police Department. We also searched the online database of student newspaper, *The Breeze*, for articles and editorial comments that characterized student grievances against the administration during the academic year when the Springfest riot took place. Finally, we used videos posted on YouTube ($n = 39$) that documented the Springfest Riot in order to construct a timeline of the event and characterize the diverse responses of partygoers to the riot. We found these videos through keyword searches – JMU, riot, Springfest, James Madison University – and also searched YouTube’s “featured videos” column to ensure that we achieved a reasonable saturation point for recordings of the event. These range from the early nonviolent gatherings to the period when police finally disperse the crowd. One author is a JMU professor and he visited the riot site in order to check the spatial orientations associated with the riotous behavior.

Due to the fluid nature of YouTube video availability, we did these searches at different points in time – between November 1, 2011 and December 15, 2011. The analysis of the YouTube accounts required a combination of several qualitative methods used in visual sociology, a field that often analyzes society through the coding of images presented in photographs, film, video, and increasingly, electronically transmitted images (International Visual Sociology Association, 2012; Schutt, 2012). In particular, the YouTube videos allowed us to observe the riotous behavior in real time and from multiple vantage points within the crowd. Importantly, these real-time responses to a unique event are likely more authentic than those which would have been provided by the same participants had they recounted their reactions to an interviewer at a later date. Indeed, the increasing availability of handheld recording devices (e.g., “smart phones”) and venues where these recordings are shared (e.g., YouTube) will likely make this type of data increasingly available.

Each video was viewed multiple times until a thick description of the action in each was transcribed. These descriptions included partygoer and police activities (i.e., movement in space, interactions between partygoers and police, interactions among partygoers, the types and occurrence of property damage, violent behavior by police and partygoers, etc.), where the scenes in the video occurred (i.e., in the parking lot, balcony of apartment, around a dumpster fire, etc.), indicators of time (i.e., daylight and dusk), and comments by police and partygoers when audible in the video. In many respects, these were virtual field notes taken from the comfort of an office with the advantage of having a rewind and pause button when the action

observed became frenetic and disorienting. Indeed, we often felt like uninvited voyeurs experiencing the event from multiple perspectives as it unfolded, with none of the associated risk. After eliminating duplicate and corrupted videos we had a final sample of 39 from which we used to construct our descriptions of the event. In total, 1 hour and 43 minutes of YouTube videos were analyzed.

In our account of the riot, we selected a few exemplary events that matched categories of behavior developed by others who have studied riots (see Parlett & Hamilton, 1976). Importantly, the descriptions of the riotous behaviors in this paper are not meant to be a complete accounting of all the material in the videos – there is far too much data to do that – but rather provide a timeline and qualitative description of acts that contributed to escalating crowd violence, or which were representative of student responses to this violence.

CULTURE AND STRUCTURAL CONDUCTIVENESS AT JMU

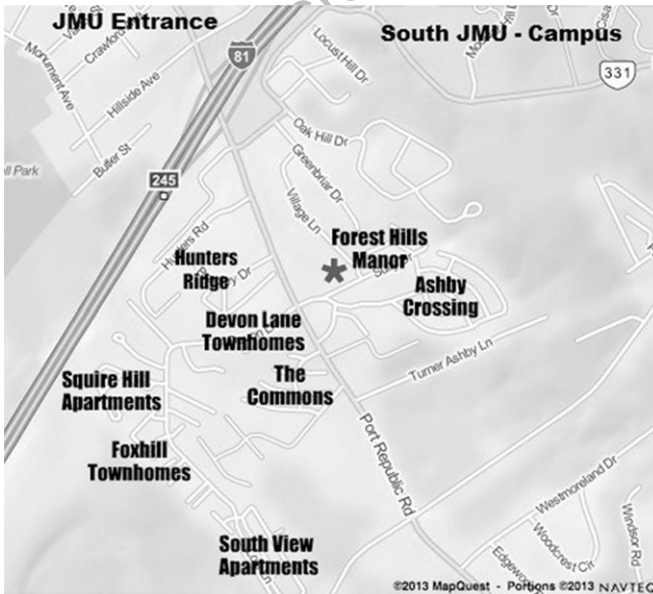
James Madison University is considered a very good Virginia state university. For example, *US News and World Report* ranked JMU as “the top public, master’s-level university in the South” for 17 consecutive years (JMU, 2010). In the fall of 2009, the enrollment was 17,281 undergraduate students and 1,690 graduate students. JMU students are overwhelmingly “traditional” in that they usually enter the university directly after graduating from High School and over 80% complete their undergraduate degree 4–5 years later. About 70% are Virginia residents, primarily from the Washington, DC suburbs, the Tidewater/Norfolk region, and Richmond. These students are overwhelmingly white (84–85%) and relatively affluent, with over two-thirds estimating that their family income is above \$100,000 dollars annually. In 2009, Asian Americans represent 5% of the student population, followed by African Americans (4%) and Latinos (2.5%) (JMU, 2010).

Proximity of “Off-Campus” Student Housing to Campus and the “Open” Party Culture at JMU

All incoming freshmen at JMU must reside in student housing provided by the university. But the rapid growth of the student population has made

on-campus housing more difficult to obtain following the first year. As a result, most JMU students, after their first year on campus, move “off-campus.” This trend facilitated a building “boom” of apartment complexes directly adjacent to the Southeast corner of the university. Studies have indicated that high-density housing is associated with a greater propensity to riot (McPhail & Miller, 1973; Snyder, 1979). The Springfest Riot occurred in an area of high-density apartment housing compacted into 250–300 acres with no single-family dwellings. It is occupied almost entirely by JMU students. We contacted local apartment managers to estimate occupancy. When they refused to provide occupancy rates, we estimated by counting individual units. A conservative estimate is that approximately 3,500 students are being housed in this area. Map 1 identifies these complexes in relation to the JMU campus. Table 1 indicates the estimated occupancy of these complexes.

These complexes are the primary hub for weekend parties at JMU as units within different buildings pool their resources and sponsor multiple parties that are open to all-comers. Traditionally, the beer and alcohol is provided



Map 1. Student Housing Cluster Near James Madison University. *Note:* Apartment complex labels were added by the authors.

Table 1. “Off-Campus” Student Housing Complexes and Occupancy.

Complex Name	Approximate Occupancy
Forrest Hills (both “Manor” and “Greenbrier”)	498 (reported by manager)
Ashby Crossing	—
Hunter’s Ridge: Apartment (13 buildings)	312–624 (estimated range) 312 (estimate = 2 bedrooms per unit) 468 (estimate = 3 bedrooms per unit) 624 (estimate = 4 bedrooms per unit)
Hunter’s Ridge Townhomes (99 townhomes)	297–396 (estimated range) 297 (estimate = 3 bedroom per unit) 396 (estimate = 4 bedrooms per unit)
Devon Lane Townhomes (70 units)	280 occupants (reported by manager)
Foxhill Estate	404 occupants (reported by manager)
Squire Hill Apartments	95 occupants (reported in the “mid-90s”)
South View Apartments (960 beds)	947 occupants – (reported 98.6% full)
The Commons (528 beds)	523 occupants – (reported 99.3% full)

for free. The complexes are close enough – roughly within a mile of the campus – that students can walk to this area from most campus dormitories. For those living on the outerreaches of campus or other areas of Harrisonburg, there is bus service, provided by the city, between these complexes and the JMU campus. Students affectionately refer to the nightly weekend service as “the drunk bus.” Ridership on an average weekend is greater than 10,000 individual rides.

One co-author of this study is a former JMU student and during discussions with her peers she found, much like Thomas Vander Ven (2011, p. 23), that drinking is “synonymous with college life.” So much so, that many equate the decision to go to JMU – which has a reputation as a “party school” – as related to an expectation that they will drink routinely as college students. The degree to which excessive drinking is now normative college behavior has been captured nicely in Vander Ven’s (2011, p. 24) recent study in which he provides accounts of student decisions to drink. One student stated: “it wasn’t really a decision, it was just an assumed action” (19-year-old male) (pp. 24). Another 21-year-old female student (pp. 23) stated: “So I guess I didn’t really have to decide to drink, the decision was made three years ago.”

At JMU, judging from the number of arrests made for being drunk in public, party intensity during the academic year follows a pattern. Incidences of arrest dramatically increase when students first arrive back

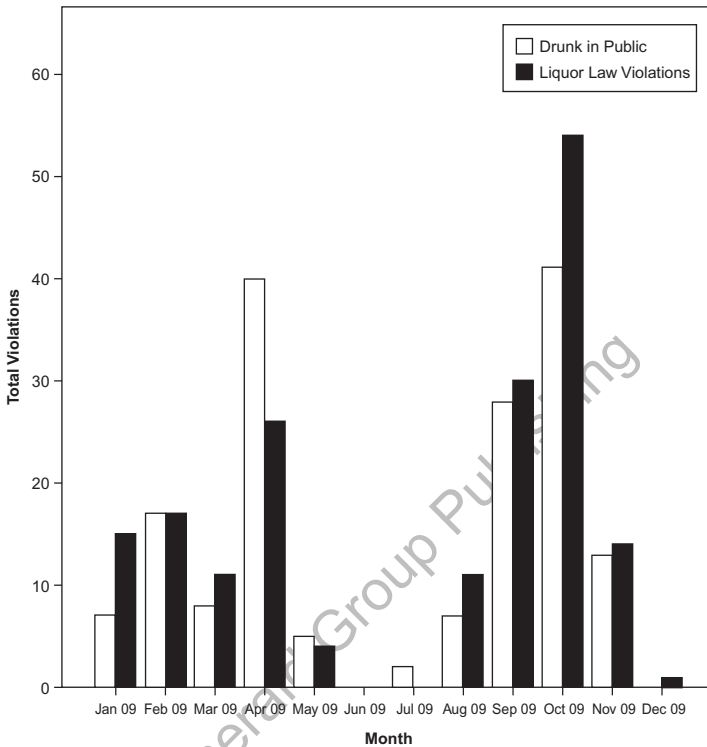


Fig. 1. Drinking Violations Reported by Harrisonburg Police Department in 2009.

at campus in late August and early September. October has high arrest rates too, due to the number of people arrested during Halloween. The arrests decline throughout the fall and winter and then spike dramatically in April, the month the outdoor party season begins. During the summer, when many students leave campus, these rates drop dramatically. Fig. 1 indicates this pattern the year previous to the Springfest Riot.

JMU Proximity to Highway 81 and Other Colleges

The weekend party site lies directly beside a major highway that runs North-South through the state (see Map 1). Regional college students – there are nearly a dozen major universities and smaller colleges within 2 hours of

JMU – are aware of the open party tradition at JMU and many drive to this area to party on the weekends. Military personnel on leave, local high school students, gang members from surrounding communities, etc., also attend these weekend parties.

Violence at parties is routine with fist fights, sexual assaults, and verbal harassment being the most common. Sometimes the violence is extraordinary. For example, on November 9, 2008 during a party at the Hunter's Ridge apartment complex a 19-year-old Liberty University student, Reginald "Shay" Nicholson – who had grown up in nearby Staunton, Virginia – was shot and killed. Five months after the Nicholson homicide, a local television news reporter conducted a follow-up report on the party culture at JMU. In this case, the reporter rode along with Officer Palaskey of the Harrisonburg Police Department, who was designated to respond to the "party calls" that weekend. He reported: "Having a good time off-campus isn't difficult. On Saturday, we were able to get into six parties in just half an hour" (WHSV News, 2009).

This news report also provides evidence that a largely "watchman" style of policing had been adopted by the local police. This style of policing allows officers to "ignore many common minor violations ... to use the law more as a means of maintaining order than of regulating conduct, and to judge the requirements of order differently depending on the character of the group in which the infraction occurs" (Wilson, 1968, p. 140, as cited in Hawdon, 2008). For example, during the "ride-along" when Officer Palaskey responds to a routine fight call he tells students at the party: "No, I'm not looking to get anybody in trouble. I'm looking to make sure that the person who's gotten into a fight is OK" (WHSV News, 2009). Later, he indicates that police have been talking with residents about the "open-party" tradition and stressing that party organizers limit attendance to people they know. "They call us, and they're like, 'Look, we have these people in our party.' We're not going to not help them because they're having a party. We want them to have a successful party. We're not here to tell people not to get together and have a good time."

Despite this polite style of policing, roughly 15–18% of JMU students annually self-report that their drinking has resulted in "trouble with the police" (see Table 3). Judging from "letters to the editor" in the student newspaper (discussed in more detail below), many JMU students believe the police routinely harass them when they are partying. Importantly, routine negative interactions with police in areas of high-density housing have been shown to increase the likelihood of riot events (McPhail, 1994; Snyder, 1979).

JMU Party Culture and Patterns of Student Drinking

Not all students at JMU “party” – a significant minority do not drink at all – but many students consider the “party atmosphere” when they decide to enroll. While heavy drinking on college campuses in the United States is increasingly normative (see Vander Ven, 2011), JMU students are exceptional in this respect. While the *Princeton Review* methodology has been critiqued, it does compare student responses nationwide and has consistently ranked JMU as a top 20 party school. Similarly, the JMU Substance Abuse Prevention (SAP) office has compared rates of drinking at JMU to a national sample of college students using the *Core Alcohol and Drug Survey* administered to nearly 200 colleges in the United States during the past 15 years. The responses indicate that JMU students drink more than most other students in the United States. In terms of average weekly drinks consumed, JMU students are in the 90th percentile of colleges (Substance Abuse Office, 2008). CORE survey results also indicate that the drinking culture at JMU more rapidly converts non-drinkers into drinkers than at other colleges. Table 2 indicates this conversion.

While police do not appear to routinely target underage drinking, many students believe that campus and local police are “out to get” students. Letters and articles addressing “police harassment” are commonly published in *The Breeze* where students complain of overzealous policing (see Knott, 2009). While local police usually ignore drinking in areas considered “private” property, they do not allow people to drink in the “public” areas (parking lots, streets, or sidewalks) outside these parties.

Table 2. Conversion to Drinking on U.S. College Campuses and JMU.

	National Sample (<i>n</i> = 15,000)		JMU (<i>n</i> = 3,068)	
	Survey 1 (Freshmen)	Survey 3 (Follow-up)	Survey 1 (Freshmen)	Survey 3 (Follow-up)
Non-drinkers	62%	51%	53%	36%
Drinkers	38%	49%	47%	64%
Heavy-episodic (4/5 once past two weeks)	24%	32%	33%	49%
Problematic (8/10 once past two weeks)	7%	10%	9%	17%

Note: Originally presented by JMU Counseling Services using data from the 2010 CORE survey results provided by the JMU Office of Substance Abuse Research.

They also monitor parties that grow dangerously large and respond to calls that report violence. If someone is drunk in a public area (e.g., a sidewalk), the police may intervene and make an arrest. Still, even “polite” policing put some students in confrontational situations with local law enforcement (see Knott, 2009). Indeed, the CORE survey (see Table 3) found that 15–18% of JMU students reported being in some trouble with the police as a result of drinking. Moreover, roughly 45% reported fighting or arguing as a result of drinking. Vander Ven (2011) makes a persuasive argument: the negative consequences associated with drinking (e.g., fighting, being sick, and missing classes) are mitigated by a system of “drunk support” in which fellow students provide crisis management to someone who experiences these negative consequences.

Table 3. Percentage of Students Reporting Problematic Consequences Due to Alcohol Use at JMU in Comparison to Virginia Students and a National Sample.

	2008 JMU Campus	2006 JMU Campus	2004 JMU Campus	2000 All Virginia	2006 Nation
Arrested for DWI/DUI	.7	.4	0.0	1.1	1.4
In trouble with police	15.3	16.9	18.1	14.9	13.7
Damaged property, pulled alarm, etc.	10.5	9.7	9.3	8.7	6.8
Driven a car under the influence	23.4	28.7	25.6	30.2	27.0
Got into an argument or fight	44.2	45.6	36.3	30.9	32.3
Tried to commit suicide	.4	1.2	1.4	1.2	1.3
Seriously thought about suicide	5.5	5.7	4.7	3.7	4.5
Been hurt or injured	28.6	29.8	25.1	15.5	16.2
Taken advantage of sexually	12.8	12.2	10.8	12.1	10.1
Taken advantage of another sexually	2.5	1.6	1.9	5.3	3.2
Tried unsuccessfully to stop using	8.3	6.5	5.6	5.4	5.2
Thought I might have a drinking/drug problem	17.1	15.3	13.0	10.1	10.8
Performed poorly on a test/important project	30.8	31.9	24.4	22.6	22.1
Done something I later regretted	50.5	50.0	43.7	39.5	37.2
Missed a class	41.2	43.3	33.2	32.5	30.1
Criticized by someone I know	42.3	38.8	41.4	30.6	30.9
Had a memory loss	49.3	55.5	46.3	34.3	33.9
Got nauseated or vomited	65.2	68.8	62.1	53.1	54.3
Had a hangover	75.4	74.6	64.7	60.6	62.5

Note: Originally published by the JMU Office of Substance Abuse Research (2008).

In the case of JMU, the physical layout of the campus, combined with routine modes of student communication, helps maintain a party culture that is probably more extreme than most other universities. In particular, the evidence that students at JMU are more rapidly “converted” into drinkers than at other universities is indicative of the strength of this culture. In effect, social structural conditions at JMU make organizing and attending large parties – numbering in the thousands of students – a routine event. Once these party tropes were established, this transfer of knowledge became embedded in the cultural repertoires of place and ensured that “partying” has become closely associated with the JMU collegiate experience.

STRUCTURAL STRAIN AND GENERALIZED BELIEF

In the months preceding the Springfest Riot, strain between the JMU administration and some students increased as measures designed to decrease student partying were established. One problem associated with identifying the “strain” variable in the Smelser model is the *ex-post-facto* nature of the enterprise, which can cause researchers to look in the “nooks and crannies” of their data to “find evidence of strain” (Marx, 1970, p. 32). It may seem remarkable that we have characterized strain to be associated with policy designed to compel students to drink less, but it was not difficult to find evidence that some students responded to the administrative crackdown by arguing they had the “right to party.”

Student Grievance

An incident that particularly galvanized student opinion occurred when the Harrisonburg Department of Public Transportation (HDPT) shortened the bus schedule, eliminating the last hour of the so-called “drunk bus.” For many, weekly rides on the “drunk bus” – which includes singing and other forms of revelry – is a JMU “rite of passage.” Despite Harrisonburg Department of Public Transportation claims that the bus cuts were a result of limited funding, disgruntled students laid most of the blame on school-affiliated administrators (see Edwards, 2009; Krumpke, 2010). In fact, Rob Cellucci – the Student Government Association (SGA) Committee Chair of Student Services and student representative to the JMU Board of Visitors – helped launch a survey administered to over

4,000 students that asked how the cuts affected their drinking behavior. In the student newspaper, *The Breeze*, articles associated with the shortening of the “drunk bus” hours almost always argued that the administration was being shortsighted, particularly since students were going to “party anyway.” Many argued the administration was placing students in greater danger. For example, Steven Knott (2010) stated the cut in service had not reduced student drinking and that it did not make sense to punish students for drinking. He ended with a few rhetorical questions:

What service will be denied next? Will the University Health Center decide to stop treating smokers suffering from sinus infections because they are the result of irresponsible behavior? The question seems foolish, but it is equivalent to what the university has done by declining bus hours: refuse to help those who need it.

Another source of contention was the administrative response to a student organized “flash mob” at the East Campus Library that took place during exam week that fall semester. The event was organized through social media, primarily Facebook, and over 4,000 confirmed that they were going to attend. In this case, thousands of students convened at the East Campus Library, accompanied by a disc jockey, and started an impromptu dance party which lasted for approximately half an hour. Because other universities had held “flash mobs,” there was an informal competition among campuses concerning who could mobilize the largest number of people. This is evident in a video compilation of the event on YouTube in which one caption states: “This is why JMU does it better It ain’t a rave until people start jumping off the balconies and climbing the walls” (Flash Mob, 2009). And, in fact, the video shows students jumping off the second floor balcony into the crowd below and also climbing columns from the first floor to the second.

The JMU administration regarded the event as dangerous and inappropriate. Indeed, judging from YouTube videos it is remarkable nobody was seriously injured. By way of contrast, the student organizers and participants were awed, pleased, and inspired by the number of people who showed up at the “rave.” This satisfaction, combined with the student perspective that the event had been “harmless,” contrasted sharply with the administration response. In particular, V.P. of Student Affairs Mark Warner sent the JMU student body an e-mail stating the event was dangerous and inappropriate. Some students responded in *The Breeze* that they resented being treated “like children” and that Warner was “out of touch” with student sensibilities.

PARTY “TRADITION” AS MOBILIZATION AND THE FAILURE OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Like other annual celebrations the Springfest party was built into life at JMU. In effect, students always planned to “mobilize” and party during the spring. In this respect, student grievances did not precipitate a mobilization, but the annual event was a mobilizing structure made more volatile by tensions throughout the 2009–2010 academic year. Ultimately, attempts to disrupt this event made the party both the means by which students mobilized and also the cause – the “right to party” – that many fought for (see McKay, 1998).

“The Spark” and the Failure of Social Control

In the case of the Springfest riot the *failure of social control* could be regarded as the inability to curb the party culture at JMU throughout the year. It can also include the specific actions undertaken by police that increased the likelihood of riotous behavior. In this regard, one event that constituted a “spark” appears to have been the police attempts at disruption the week and days previous to the party. These became well known when *The Breeze* reported, under the title “Police to Pressure Springfest,” that both the police and Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) intended to elevate their presence at Springfest (Sutter, 2010). A few days previous to the event, the Foxhill Townhomes property manager posted flyers on all the unit doors stating: “Please be advised that this event violates the Restrictions, Covenants, and Bylaws of the Foxhills Townhomes Association and may put you in default of your respective leases” (Sutter, 2010). Students quickly moved the party venue to another venue at Forrest Hill Townhomes.

These actions appear to have made some students more determined “to party” during Springfest. This became apparent to one author of this study when he overheard a student, before class, talking with others about the police attempts “to stop” Springfest. He insisted he was “going to party” and then informed other students if they “poured out” their drinks before the police approached they could avoid being arrested. Not all students were as “committed” to party as this student – some pointedly said they intended to skip the event.

After the riot, student comments in *The Breeze* also indicated many believed police intervention changed student attitudes. A typical response

was an editorial by JMU student John Scott (2010, p. 7) who stated (*italics added*):

When the Harrisonburg Police Department did not trust students enough to party peacefully, there was a fundamental shift in students' attitude about their *right to party*. These responsible drinkers who were cast out Friday inherently saw the police's action as a slap in the face. Those usually orderly individuals in turn acted like children on Saturday because they were being treated like children on Friday.

In this case, *the spark* and *failure of social control* variables are inter-related. Once news that police were intent on establishing control of the event was disseminated some students became more determined to party. Initially, relocating the event at another nearby housing complex was not difficult given that students routinely organize large parties in this location too. But following the second attempt at disruption (the night before the party) it appears many students simply decided to ignore police attempts to shut down the second venue. In effect, the attempt by police to prevent Springfest became another action that helped solidify some student grievance toward the police.

In the Springfest case, the "precipitating event" is out of sequence with regards to its placement in the original value-added model. In this respect, the planning for the Springfest mobilization does not fit into the time sequence of the Smelser model because this annual event is part of the JMU culture. Like other celebrations, the mobilization was built into life at JMU, but conditions throughout the 2009–2010 academic year made the annual event more volatile.

POLICE-STUDENT INTERACTIONS AND THE FAILURE OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Police actions varied during the party and often affected crowd behavior. In this respect the nature of the event changed from dangerous revelry toward an active fight, by some partygoers, against the riot police. Generally, patterns of violence shifted when police moved from trying to politely control the gathering to dispatching a "civil disturbance unit" that then steadily escalated in their use of force in order to clear people from the party site. In line with the findings of McCarthy et al. (2007), it appears that the scale of the party (roughly 8,000 were in attendance) – combined with direct threat to the police – helped precipitate a fairly rapid escalation in the use of force police employed against partygoers.

We were able to observe one pivotal moment during the initial policing of the event in which four regular uniformed police officers were surrounded by a crowd of hundreds. This small group of officers had cordoned off a section of parking lot and a hillside near the entrance of the complex where the party was being held. In established patterns for policing weekend parties, this is technically an area of public space that the partygoers should not encroach into. In this case, people in the crowd openly mock police attempts to maintain this public space. They sometimes boo as two officers attempt to maintain a spatial boundary between “public” and “private” areas at the complex (TheFederalistJMU, 2010a).

During this attempt to police “politely”, one videographer interviews a young man who is urging the crowd to surround the officers. “Honestly, they think they have power, but they really don’t If you surround them all at one time and link arms they cannot stop you.” Later, he coaxes another partygoer toward moving into the public space. He later yells, “This is not a police state!” His actions make him an exemplary agent provocateur or “exploiter” who encourages others to act in a confrontational manner conducive to creating more volatility and violence (Turner & Killian, 1987 [1972], p. 29). Soon afterwards a beer bottle is thrown toward the officers and some in the crowd cheer. Next, four police officers can be seen withdrawing from the parking lot – people throw cups and bottles of beer as they withdraw – and then the crowd, many cheering and obviously ecstatic, rush into the now unoccupied public space.

From an ESIM perspective, this is an exemplary interaction between police and partygoers that was likely interpreted by these groups in wildly different manners. The student occupation of public space – coupled with disregard of police authority – was a clear norm violation from police perspectives, and also clearly different than the routine patterns of policing used to control parties in this housing area. Students may have regarded the parking area as an extension of student housing, or perhaps expected an exception would be made for the block party. Practically, once police were pushed from this space the escalation in police force became a largely inevitable response. Importantly, this event was specifically referenced by a police spokesman in a WHSV television interview directly following the riot: “‘They started getting beer bottles thrown at them, different debris thrown at them so they backed out. Once they backed out we called in the civil disturbance unit,’ says Lt. Kurt Boshart with the Harrisonburg Police Department” (WHSV, 2010).

In the interim period between when the police “back out” and before the riot police arrive, there were clear acts of violence and damage to property

that appear unrelated to police actions. In particular, in a “backyard” area of the complex, another event similarly escalates as hundreds of partygoers stand among flying beer bottles, some directed at people on decks above the crowd. Townhome windows are broken and a chair is eventually thrown from a deck into the crowd below. At the center of the crowd is a small electrical transfer box surrounded by hundreds of beer cans, bottles, and other trash. Glass can be heard breaking during a “King of the Mountain” game in which men take turns standing atop the box while some in the crowd pelt them with beer cans and beer bottles. After dodging the bottles, the men often dismount once they are hit with bottles of beer. Others take their place. On occasion, the videos show objects that appear to explode – likely full bottles of beer – after someone is hit. Throughout, people in the crowd cheer as individuals are forced to dismount from the box (Bj2451, 2010; BIGNeek08, 2010; SuperLolwut9000, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2010e, 2010f, 2010g; Thatsabadvideo6121, 2010).

By this time some partygoers are beginning to exhibit feelings of uneasiness, but many – literally as they dodge the beer bottles being thrown at them – seem intent on maintaining the “cheeriness” associated with routine party behavior. Beer bottles, at times, literally rain from the sky. A shirtless man with a bloody mouth appears as chants of “USA” rise throughout the crowd. Someone off-camera notes that they were “hit in the eye.” Another clearly worried but not panicked, states, “I want to leave now.” But as this barrage of bottles increases in intensity others begin chanting “ole ole ole” while collectively jumping up and down (Adamsma48, 2010).

The response is different among people observing the event from its periphery. One bystander observing the spectacle comments incredulously, “People are throwing full beers ... do you see this? The guy in the cowboy hat [the target on the box] is going to get reamed man ... he’s going to get fucked up, dude ... he’s going to get cranked.” Another adds, “he’s going to get killed.” Yet another person exclaims, “People are fucking retards man. Throwing bottles?” And some levity from a young woman, “that’s just immature ... first of all that’s just wasting beers” (Biged921, 2010).

At this point, the conventional definition of a “riot” has been fulfilled, but it is also striking how “calm” and sometimes detached people are from events, sometimes dangerous, taking place in close proximity to them (see McPhail, 1994). Some respond nonchalantly to questions from the impromptu documentarians as the melee occurs behind them. Even people most proximate to the danger do not devolve into a mob or the “mad crowd.” A few people are concerned, a few leave, and others see the events as acceptable revelry and respond to destruction with chants and cheers in

unison. Similar to McPhail (1994) we observed relatively few people – hundreds among the thousands in attendance – engage in destructive behaviors during the riot. Likewise, those who did engage in violence did not do so continually.

There is a split among partygoers concerning their attitudes toward the police. In one video posted by the TheFederalistJMU (2010a), the cameraperson asked multiple partygoers: “What do you think of the police involvement?” One man characterizes the police as “doing their job.” A young woman laughs before responding, “They are doing a really good job of not getting involved.” Soon after these statements, police in riot gear station themselves at the periphery of the party and this clearly affects the riot trajectory. The police then adopted tactics associated with strategic incapacitation and prepare to use non-lethal weapons – tear gas and pepper spray – to gain control of the space (see Fernandez, 2008; Gillham & Noakes, 2007; Ratliff, 2011; Soule & Davenport, 2009). This appears to precipitate defiance among the most committed members of the crowd toward the police (see Waddington, 2007). “You guys know the cops have riot gear and stuff, what do you think about that?” the TheFederalistJMU (2010a), later asks a group. One responds, “I dare them.” Another, clearly intoxicated, states loudly: “Fuck the cops ... Fuck the PO-Lease.”

The police station themselves at the periphery of the party – they first arrest a few partygoers who kneel in front of them to block their progress – then roughly a dozen form a line, shields drawn, and slowly walk into the parking lot where the party is being held. At first they talk with some partygoers, some are filing past them, leaving the party. A few who actively try and impede – some kneel, others later stand with their fingers in “peace signs” – are pepper sprayed and stagger away from the police. The goal of the police appeared to be dispersion of the crowd, but on a few occasions partygoers are physically detained.

Escalating Confrontations

The number of riot police observed is not large; 12–15 actually advance into the complex in the beginning and this precipitates the first confrontation between them and partygoers in the main parking lot. McPhail (2006) has noted that dispersal orders given by police officers are often not audible to those in the crowd and that it is common that insufficient time is allowed for crowd members to follow these orders. We cannot make an emphatic judgment as to whether everyone in the crowd heard the dispersal orders,

but it seems evident that the police were making a concerted effort to have their orders heard and for people to respond. Throughout the escalation, one uniformed officer – standing behind the line of officers in riot gear – did make several announcements using a megaphone. Notably, we were able to transcribe the announcement that preceded the deployment of the tear gas (discussed below).

We did observe that many partygoers, after the riot police arrived, did move quickly to the periphery of the party area. Those who do not disperse were about a couple hundred in number. A few hurl bottles toward the police. Others do not actively fight, but seem intent on not allowing the police to disperse them. Others simply watch while remaining in close proximity to the violence. As this smaller crowd resisted dispersal, the officer with a megaphone states: “Everyone who is outside, we are about to deploy gas. This is going to be serious. I am going to say it again, you need to leave immediately ... this is very serious ... you are going to be choking in a minute. Move inside or move away or you are going to get gas on you” (Blockparty, 2010). As gas is deployed many in the crowd scatter, running from the gas, but others watching the scene cheer. A few canisters of tear gas are thrown back toward the police. One hits an officer and cheering again erupts from the resisting crowd and from some bystanders. From other vantage points – in apartments or on a hill directly above the action – people actively watch, and sometimes cheer for those fighting the police. Many appear elated by the events. A few comment on the opportunity to observe something “historical” or “epic.” An exploiter shouts, “Someone hit that Beamer!” Another editorializes, “this is a little ridiculous.” And another states, “this is awesome ... way too funny” (NR1025, 2010).

Onlookers from inside an apartment find the deployment of gas extraordinary and excessive, but another concerned woman states, “No, they deserve it, like honestly, like everyone is being a fucking idiot” (Thatsabadvideo6121, 2010). In another apartment, after cursing the police, one man exclaims loudly, “I love my school!” and then addresses a friend, “You wish UVA [University of Virginia] was this rowdy!” (Xact5adventures, 2010).

In the final stages of dispersal, police in formation moved toward hundreds of partygoers who surrounded, and occasionally added fuel to a large dumpster fire. A few rioters continued to throw bottles at police, cars, and buildings – a “streaker” runs between them (Lundahbs, 2010b; Ohbridget, 2010; Pissbucketvideos, 2010). This group of approximately 75–100 of the most committed remain gathered around the fire (see Pictures 1 and 2) as



Picture 1. Crowd Surrounding Dumpster Fire during Springfest Riot. Originally published in Somers & Sutherland (2010), “War Zone,” *The Breeze*. Photographer Robert Boag.

a line of 20 or so police in riot gear look on from 30–40 yards away. Lundahbs (2010a) posted a video that captured a partygoer’s perspective as a second dumpster, closer to the police, began to catch fire: “I mean, this is ... I will ... I will walk away from my college career knowing that this happened when I was here. I’m going to graduate happy now.” [Pissbucketvideos \(2010\)](#) ended their video on a more philosophical note by quoting renowned journalist [William Allen White \(1937 \[1932\], p. 331\)](#): “If our colleges and universities do not breed men who riot, who rebel, who attack life with all their youthful vim and vigor, then there is something wrong with our colleges. The more riots that come on college campuses, the better world for tomorrow.”

There is also one last lingering confrontation that occurs in an area adjacent to the housing complex at the Liberty gas station (see [Picture 3](#)). In this case, police remain on the periphery of the complex – intent on not allowing students back into the space they had secured – while some students continued to hurl invective, and occasionally a few bottles, in the direction of the police. Most in the crowd seem less committed at this point, although a few continue to engage in largely symbolic acts of resistance toward police (see [Picture 3](#)).



Picture 2. A Rioter in Front of a Dumpster Fire. Originally published in Somers & Sutherland (2012), *War Zone*, *The Breeze*. Photographer David Casterline.

The FederalistJMU, (2010b) now talking to people disengaged from the action on the fringe of the Liberty gas station, asks a young man why he thinks the police intervened so forcefully:

It's bull shit dude, all right, you know, you ever heard of block party? I've been here since 12 o'clock, 12 o'clock p.m. when this shit started; we were one of the first people in that little clearing up here; we were just drinking, like ... partying, they had music, the shit seemed legit ... fuckin' about five o'clock people start throwing beer bottles. My best friend is in the hospital, he got hit in the face with a fuckin' forty, a Budweiser forty! It was like a fuckin' war zone dude. I was standing there and dude got hit with a fuckin' big ass forty; eight inch fuckin' shard of glass in his skull ...

Another person interrupts saying, "they didn't even tell us they were going to tear gas us, they didn't even warn us." This prompts the cameraman to



Picture 3. Rioter, Dispersed from Party Site, “Moons”. Police from the Liberty Gas Station. Originally published April 10, 2010 in the online edition of *The Breeze*. Photographer David Casterline.

ask, “Why did they start doin’ the tear gas?” The first partygoer responds: “People were fighting; people were beating the shit out of each other.” Another partygoer adds that “kids were fighting the police ... [but] if the police didn’t show up they wouldn’t fight ’em.” Then, the first partygoer chimes back in (*italics added*):

All ... no ... police intervention until fuckin’ people started getting hurt. And then they came, they had it blocked off for a little while ... but you could still get in through here [the hillside by the Liberty gas station] so people were still flowing in. *Shit got out of control*, they wanted to take charge. They really have no control over this whole fucking area right now ... *there is zero control*.

CONCLUSION

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Neil Smelser's (1971 [1962]) renowned work, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, in which he introduced the value-added model for explaining collective behavior. Initially the work was much ballyhooed, and then later much criticized. Some later criticisms included that it was too wedded to the structural functionalist tradition and did not capture the emergent quality of collective behavior. A more specific criticism was the approach was not adequate for describing so-called "issueless" riots, which often included "celebratory" riots, because these events occurred in the absence of both "generalized grievance" and "structural strain" (Marx, 1970; McPhail, 1971). We are not interested in resurrecting the structural functionalist tradition, but do believe the anniversary of *Theory of Collective Behavior* offers an opportunity to reassess the value-added approach. We also believe in the case of the Springfest riot that both grievance and strain were likely causal to the riot event. At the very least, an evaluation of these variables provides insight into how JMU students assessed the riot event as they observed it.

We find support for many aspects of Smelser's value-added approach. In all, we believe our data indicates the model variables were present and likely causal with respect to enabling the Springfest riot. But our study, like others, also demonstrates the problematic nature of claiming the model is "value-added" and we doubt the variables in Smelser's model are sequentially causal to one another. Rather, there is likely some interaction between variables in the model that create differing levels of causality with respect to riotous behavior. While perfectly "weighting" these interactions is impossible in this study, describing these variables does offer a "big picture" view of social conditions causing the Springfest event.

Depending on a riot event's characteristics some variables are more important than others. And some variables – particularly routine patterns of mobilization associated with parties, sporting events, etc. – are not mutually exclusive. In the case of the Springfest riot, we believe the block party became the "cause" – the "right" to party – that students were fighting for. At the same time, it was a mobilizing structure built into JMU's culture. As such, we included a discussion of cultural tropes and repertoires when describing structural conduciveness. We believe JMU party culture – particularly routine organizing of large parties – is closely associated with structural conduciveness in this case.

Our approach may still seem deterministic, but we did adapt the Smelser model – largely using a modest application of ESIM perspectives – to account for the emergent quality of crowd – police interactions during the riot event. These emergent behaviors point to an important interaction between ritualistic cultural practices – much loved and clearly normative behaviors among many students at JMU – that created the intense meaning that the Springfest event had for many students. Moreover, the disruption of an event closely associated with a valued ritual appears to have evoked greater hostility toward JMU officials and the Harrisonburg Police Department. Thus, future research on celebratory riots might benefit from examining if people are reacting to attempts at changing a tradition or cultural celebration – and this would include tropes associated with sporting rituals – in which there is a high degree of personal attachment and group solidarity. In fact, it is possible that attempts to disrupt celebratory festivals are often a tipping point – they may reinforce grievance – even though the events may initially present themselves as celebrations or parties not associated with long-standing grievances.

The Springfest riot was not inevitable, and its trajectory was clearly affected by specific police–student interactions, but the structural and cultural context at JMU makes the incidence of party riot more likely. Indeed, we are reasonably sure there will be party riots in the future at JMU due to the structural and cultural variables we have described. Quantifying the degree to which these variables are causal to a specific riot experience is difficult, but we think the adoption of a heuristic approach – one that integrates theories that “best fit” the specific event and data available – helped us explore riotous behavior more thoroughly in this case study. We also believe that our case, while unique, does capture many of the same types of interactions that are causal to rioting events on other college campuses.

In the direct aftermath of the Springfest Riot, considerable pressure was exerted on students by the JMU administration. Policies were changed and disciplinary action associated with excessive partying hardened. The policing became far less polite. The parties at the Port Republic complexes were more closely monitored. In the 2 years since the riot, there has been no Springfest party. Moreover, the current JMU administration continues to explicitly inform students that the alcohol culture at the university will be changed. But practically, the routine modes of partying – after this initial crackdown – have been largely re-established. It is not hard to find a party at JMU on the weekend.

Despite administration attempts to “change the alcohol culture” at JMU, we suspect more riots are likely in the future. Indeed, riot is built into both the structure and the student culture of the institution. Notably, this was not

the first party riot at JMU, the previous one occurring on August 25, 2000, the weekend most JMU students returned to campus for the fall semester. This riot also took place at the Forest Hills complex. In this case, many attending a “back-to-school” party that drew about 2,000 people resisted police attempts to disperse them at midnight, resulting in a 3 hour stand-off between 35 officers in riot gear who also used pepper spray and tear gas during the confrontation. Partygoers returned fire with rocks and bottles. Many cars were vandalized during the fight, including a police car that was tipped on its side during the melee (*The Breeze*, 2010). Notably, the initial institutional response in the aftermath of that riot event appears nearly identical to the ongoing attempts by JMU officials to reduce student drinking. Indeed, after the riot in August 2000 a task force was formed to assure that a similar event would not happen in the future.

In all, the emergent quality of riot events makes prediction – in a narrow sense – a difficult endeavor. Indeed, this problem has long befuddled students of collective behavior. Recent studies, however, have examined how different forms of state repression (e.g., counterterrorism and protest policing) influence dissent in different ways over time (see *Davenport*, 2007). In particular, *Earl and Soule* (2010) showed how different strategies and levels of force used by police at protest events impact subsequent protest levels, although the suppression of protest differs over time and by social movement. Likewise, others have shown that police respond differently to different crowd contexts (*McCarthy et al.*, 2007), when different tactics are used by social movements, and even to the different spaces where a crowd mobilization occurs (see *Ratliff*, 2011).

We do not want to conflate the claims-making undertaken by social movements with the types of grievances that fuel violence during “beer riots,” but we do think the shared identity of students coupled with their routine, often negative interactions with police created the potential for the greater violence during the Springfest party. Further research is needed with respect to how different forms of collective behavior are influenced over time, particularly in cases in which methods of control are implemented as a means of ensuring public safety. In this respect, the Springfest case is useful because it offered the opportunity to examine many factors – cultural, structural, emergent, and situational – that made a violent outcome more likely.

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