Impossible Jobs or impossible tasks? Client volatility and front line policing practice in urban riots

Abstract

Various public administration jobs are described as "impossible" - they have an unpopular or illegitimate client base, stakeholders with conflicting values, and leaders and their agency's mission are continually questioned. Although this framework is widely used, it has also become overgeneralized. We propose three theoretical extensions to understanding impossible jobs, based on findings from a three year, multi-method study of riot policing. First, we suggest a helpful distinction can be drawn between impossible jobs and impossible tasks. Second, we clarify the relationship between impossible jobs and street-level bureaucracy - the case of riot police shows some street-level bureaucrats face impossible tasks. Third, we show conceptualization of the client base has been overly static - in some situations the client base fractures, or grows rapidly, and legitimacy can change in real time.

Key words: governance, impossible jobs, policing, riot
Introduction

“Impossible jobs,” a concept taken from Hargrove and Glidewell's (1990) edited book, Impossible Jobs in Public Management, is an idea frequently discussed by public administrators. The framework has attracted widespread use and remains popular, but it has become overgeneralized (Maranto and Wolf, 2012). The contribution of this article, based on analysis of multi-method empirical data, is to propose three theoretical extensions to the impossible jobs framework. (1) We differentiate between jobs and tasks (jobs can combine possible and impossible tasks). (2) We give a clearer account of the relationship between street-level jobs and impossible jobs (some street-level bureaucrats face impossible tasks). (3) We give a richer account of the concept of a client base (sometimes "the" client base can fracture, or grow very rapidly, and can change very quickly from legitimate to illegitimate). Our context is a three year study of how police officers in England train for, and confront riots.¹

The article proceeds as follows. First, we review the literature on impossible jobs. We then introduce the context for our study - policing. Drawing on extensive multi-site, multi-method data we analyze the policing of riots. We conclude by outlining three theoretical extensions to the "impossible jobs" framework.

Impossible Jobs

A number of related terms can describe the intractable problems public agencies sometimes face, among them "wicked problems" (Rittel and Webber, 1973), "adaptive problems" (Heifetz, 1994), or "messes" (van Bueren, Klijn and Koppenjan, 2003). When it comes to considering these in relation to a job, the principal framework public administration scholars have in mind is Lipsky's (2010) street-level
bureaucracy (Brodkin, 2011; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2012). For street-level bureaucrats, dilemmas arise because the complexities of the individual case have to mesh with the machinery of the state. Rather than being resolved at a policy level, such problems reside with, and are worked on by, individuals (the second half of Lipsky's title being *Dilemmas of the individual in public services*). Though dilemmas are products of institutional arrangements and constraints, it is the individual public servant who grapples with them at street-level (Foldy and Buckley, 2010; Lipsky, 2010). Given the richness of scholarship inspired by Lipsky, it is appropriate to explain where the impossible jobs framework makes an additional contribution to understanding.

Hargrove and Glidewell originally suggested that the heads of some street-level organizations had impossible jobs: "top agency officials" (Hult, 1992: 539); "agency heads" (Dobel, 1992: 146); "commissioners" (Porter, 1991: 247). These jobs are not impossible because of dilemmas at the individual case-level, or associated problems Lipsky identifies: the social construction of the client, the challenge of giving individualized consideration within a bureaucracy, the problem allocating benefits and sanctions, the struggle to translate and implement policy amid constraints and ambiguity (Lipsky, 2010). Instead, an impossible job is impossible because some public agencies can never make good on the service they promise to deliver. Four criteria define impossible jobs:

1. unpopular client base; 2. intense conflict among the stakeholders; 3. low public confidence in manager’s professional authority; 4. weak or negative agency myth (Moynihan 2005: 214).

Each of the above criteria signals a two-way relationship between: (i) the image, purpose and identity of the agency discharging a service, and (ii) the wider public. This wider public includes users and
recipients (the clients of the street-level bureaucrat), but - a difference from Lipsky's main focus - it extends more broadly to other stakeholders. The image, purpose and identity of a public agency also depend on public perceptions, a political context, stakeholders such as the media, and contextual features, that can change over time. The impossible jobs framework complements street-level bureaucracy, but suggests we need to consider the fuller socio-historical context of a public agency, as well as consider the dilemmas of the individual public servant, and the client (in the impossible jobs framework "client" is used broadly to refer to the users of an agency's services, or the targets of its attention).

Using these criteria, impossible jobs could be characterized as common in public administration (Dobel, 1992). Indeed, though their original focus was at commissioner level, the impossible jobs framework has since been applied widely to describe entire contexts and activities - drug counselling, mental healthcare provision, foster care, correction, administering welfare, social work, sexual health, and policing (Frederickson and LaPort 2002; Jobes, 2003; Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997; Vinzant and Crothers, 1996). Partly because of its popularity, "impossible job" has become more a kind of shorthand and less of an analytical framework - applied so widely it has become overgeneralized (Maranto and Wolf, 2012). This is not just because "impossible" is a catchy tagline or slogan, it is because it may be understating to describe only some, commissioner-level, jobs as impossible, "[a]ll public management jobs are in some sense impossible" (Dobel, 1992: 146). To test Hargrove and Glidewell's (1990) ideas, we applied their framework to consider a context we viewed as especially challenging - riot policing. Mindful of problems with single case analyses (Konisky and Reenock, 2012), which characterizes much of the literature on law-enforcement (Nicholson-Crotty and O'Toole, 2004), this study utilizes data
gathered from multiple sources and sites. Prior to focusing on riot policing, it is appropriate to consider policing in general as an "impossible job."

Policing as an Impossible Job

"Impossible job" is used to describe the activities and duties required of a police commissioner, (Fleming, 2008; Moore, 1990) as well as the day-to-day, street-level activities of policing (Jobes, 2003; Vinzant and Crothers, 1996). It is also used to refer to police management (Vickers and Kouzmin, 2001), the general functions of a police agency (Hart, 2011), and, most widely, "law enforcement" (Jobes, 2003). As with the wider literature on impossible jobs, there has been some semantic slippage in terms of Hargrove and Glidewell’s original theory, which refers to commissioners. We clarify this point later, for now it is enough to note that many scholars describe policing using "impossible job" (Maranto and Wolf, 2012).

The context for many of these studies is the U.S., and the system of federal, state and county police in the U.S. is not replicated elsewhere (Maguire and Mastrofski, 2000). Analogous problems confront police officers in other developed democracies though (Jobes, 2002). Perennial themes in studying police work relate to the adequacy of police supervision, the extent to which there is a legal basis for police actions, and the limits to the power of individual officers and the police force as a whole (Brown, 1988). For example, in England, in ways that bear comparison with law enforcement in the U.S. (Cole, Smith and DeJong, 2012), police officers have a duty to uphold certain rights, but also face a complex set of accountabilities and obligations (Wicks and Carney, 2009). As in the U.S., these accountabilities
and obligations can come into conflict, and the unpredictable nature of the job continually produces dilemmas (Bovens and Zouridis, 2002; Kiel and Watson, 2009; Mastrofski, 2004).

Laws and procedures help resolve some dilemmas, but at heart police work involves problem solving and grappling with conflicting choices. "Discretion is inherent in the policing function" (Lewis et al, 2013: 5). The central importance of discretion, and grappling with dilemmas calls to mind Lipsky, but we suggest the "impossible jobs" criteria are useful in highlighting further, distinctive aspects of policing, especially when it comes to riot policing. Riot policing, as a job, merits the "impossible jobs" tag, but not simply at the level of commissioner. Given the power of individual officers, and the volatility of some crowd situations, the dimensions of impossibility (client legitimacy, stakeholder conflict, lack of professional authority, weak agency myth) apply at the front-line. To demonstrate this and show how we theoretically extend Hargrove and Glidewell's (1990) framework, the sections below report on a period of longitudinal research studying riot policing.

**Riot Policing**

From July 2010 to August 2013, we used interviews, observation and documentary analysis to study the job of riot policing. Approximately 18 months into the research programme, the context changed unexpectedly and dramatically, when England experienced rioting on an unprecedented scale. The sections below describe two phases of research: before and after the riots.
Phase 1 Interviews, Observation and Documentary Data on Riot Training

In phase 1 of interview research we contacted five long-serving, or retired, officers. All had extremely extensive, relevant experience. We taped and transcribed some interviews (combined length approximately 70,000 words). For others (face to face, telephone and skype), we took contemporaneous notes, recording additional comments shortly afterwards. These officers enabled access to observation of training scenarios and other interviewees and, throughout the research, supported sense-checking and data triangulation (Nesbit et al, 2011). In February 2011, during regional training (involving around 140 officers from three forces), we observed four, large-scale scenarios that simulated progressively more volatile situations, culminating in riot. We also gained access to observe senior officers’ pre-scenario briefings and post-scenario de-briefings (eight in total). Observation offered the opportunity to study close-hand extraordinarily rich and large scale simulations of events that are comparatively rare, and otherwise largely unpredictable. To enhance understanding based on primary observational data, we analyzed relevant documents - videos and leaflets; conceptual models specific to the forces we observed, and from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) (models of conflict management, command structures, strategic principles and tactical considerations); national policies from ACPO; publicly available footage of training at the relevant forces; and scenario-specific materials such as scripts.

Phase 2 Interviews, Observation and Documentary Data on The August Riots

In August 2011 there were large scale riots in England (described below). These, and two related data sources, are our focal case. The first, on August 11, is a televised, transcribed debate in Parliament when members of parliament (MPs) were called to debate the riots (approximately 70,000 words). The second,
also televised and transcribed, is Select Committee testimony from police officers, witnesses and stakeholders between September and November 2011 (Select Committees in England compare with Select Committees in the U.S. Congressional system) (approximately 160,000 words). We also studied the government's response (Britain, 2012), the report by the Metropolitan Police (2012) 4 Days in August, and other relevant reports (The Guardian, 2012; Lewis et al, 2011; Ministry of Justice, 2011, 2012). In April 2012, we began a second phase of 62 interviews. Interviewees ranged from front-line officers with less than two years of experience to operational commanders (referred to as "Bronze" level) whose careers began in the late 1980s. We continued to ask about riot policing, but in light of prior interviews and data, we asked about specific incidents, accessing a wider pool of experience, with a focus on work in the field. In all interviews we asked "what was your most memorable public order incident" to tap into the salience and specificity of critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954). Interviewees referred to incidents in the August disorder and other memorable incidents. Still, as it is the focal case, we introduce our findings with an account of these events, prior to considering this and other data from our study using Hargrove and Glidewell's framework.3

*The August Riots*

On August 6th, protest following the London Metropolitan police's fatal shooting of Mark Duggan, a black resident of Tottenham, led to a riot (see also Britain, 2012; Dodd and Davies, 2011; The Guardian, 2012; Hope, 2012). Mr. David Lammy, MP for Tottenham, spoke movingly to Parliament about the origins of initial rioting:
A grieving family and my constituents deserve to know the truth... Why did the Duggan family first hear about the death of their son not from a police officer, but when the news was broadcast on national television? Why, when they arrived at Tottenham police station to ask questions and to stage a peaceful protest, were they made to wait for five hours before a senior police officer was made available to them? Why, when that peaceful protest was hijacked by violent elements, were a few skirmishes allowed to become a full-scale riot, with far-reaching consequences?

Events at Tottenham were a flashpoint (Waddington, 2012) for large-scale rioting across many English cities between August 6th and 9th. The scale of this was remarkable - over the next year over 3,000 people were prosecuted for related offenses (Ministry of Justice, 2012). Unlike the original protests about Mark Duggan, many rioters had no clear goal, and often operated in small, widely dispersed groups with varying motives and actions. Alongside organized criminal gangs, other groups and individuals carried out vandalism, arson, indiscriminate, opportunistic or targeted looting, or attacked police officers. In parliamentary debate on the 11th, Prime Minister David Cameron asserted Mark Duggan's death had been, "used as an excuse by opportunist thugs in gangs, first in Tottenham itself, then across London and in other cities." In response, the Opposition (minority) Leader Ed Milliband stated, "[w]e need a sustained effort to tackle the gangs in our cities—something we knew about before these riots." Politicians in badly affected areas described opportunist and gang-related criminality, "opportunistic looting" (Ms. Cooper, MP for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford), "deliberate, organized, violent criminality" (Ms. Blears, MP for Salford), "mindless idiots who capitalised on an opportunity to nick [steal] some trainers [shoes] or a plasma TV" (Ms. Alexander, MP for Lewisham East), "organized criminality that trashed the centre of Manchester" (Mr. Lloyd, MP for Manchester Central).
During the riots, gangs suspended territorial postcode (zip code) rivalries, calling a temporary truce to exploit the chaos. However, later large-scale analysis concluded, gang involvement in disorder was "significantly overstated" (Lewis et al, 2011: 4). A special issue of the criminology journal, *Criminal Justice Matters* (Hope, 2012), explicitly challenged Prime Minister Cameron's account of the riots as, "criminality, pure and simple." Instead, contributors pointed to comparable "flashpoint" dynamics in previous riots (Waddington, 2012), to, "poverty and deprivation, chronic youth unemployment" (Jefferson, 2012), and a "carnivalesque" style of protest (Spalek, Isakjee and Davies, 2012). Hope (2012: 3) drew parallels with Johnson and Farrell's (1992) study of the L.A. riots:

civil unrest in L.A. called for the deployment of a much greater number of emergency personnel and exacted a much heavier toll; a wider range of different ethnic and social groups participated, affecting many more communities and places than previously; the destruction and losses appeared to be more systematic and targeted; and the rioting spread out beyond the areas that had experienced it before.

Having described our focal case, we present our findings using Hargrove and Glidewell's framework, taking each dimension in turn and combining analysis of the August riots alongside other informative incidents.

*The Client Base*

A key theme in the August riots was that use of technology unexpectedly and radically altered the police's client base: spreading criminality in real time through "copycatting." One experienced public order commander described rapid transfer of information as a key characteristic of the riots, "the speed [it] flashed around the country into people's living rooms and on their handhelds." As well as being
replicated across London, events spread north. A front-line specialist public order officer described his experience in Leicester (100 miles away):

we’d seen on television what was going on... we expected that we would get similar, it started off just as pockets of small disorder with kids mainly running around on their bikes, balaclavas on, smashing windows, shops, and then it progressed into them looting shops and throwing bricks, bottles at police.

Justin, a frontline police officer in Birmingham during the disorder, said, "I know people were surprised at how quickly it spread around London and copied into Birmingham and up North." This matched Select Committee testimony. Acting Commissioner Tim Godwin, Metropolitan Police, stated, "[w]e were not expecting that level and spread, that replication, that copying of sheer criminality." A former gang member, Nathan Chin, testified, "Everyone was copying Tottenham."

Remote coordination and contemporary instant messaging technology amplified this copying. The client base mushroomed. Other aspects of the riots illustrated more familiar challenges for practice - when should the police intervene, and how should they intervene? These are not just problems for commanders. John described how judgment is necessary even in the chaos of riot, because it is difficult to assess client legitimacy, "when you wave your arm... there are sometimes 10 people in that space doing different things... you've got various options, you can use force to protect others [or] property, or you could arrest [or] retreat, or you could liaise with your colleague, [or] you can talk to them."

There is an additional complication for Hargrove and Glidewell's framework. Riot police, by their attributions and actions (such as decision to detain or arrest), can change the legitimacy of the client base - either individuals or groups - in real time. The Metropolitan Police had to defend themselves against
criticisms for not intervening more forcefully in events at Tottenham, and many suggested this incited further disorder. Referring to subsequent riots, Ms. James (MP for Stourbridge) described how, "we heard a lot about the stand-and-observe order that was apparently given to the police in particular circumstances. We all agree that that was terrible." Although Acting Commissioner Tim Godwin conceded in Select Committee testimony that failure to intervene had been problematic, our interviewees indicated perceptions of "stand-and-observe" were sometimes mistaken. At times, police lines were cordons protecting strategically important facilities. Joe described his second night in Birmingham, "stood on a cordon for probably about six hours... just protecting one road which led directly to... the two main police control rooms." Joe confirmed none of the public would have been aware of the location or significance of the command centre:

it’s frustrating to the police on the ground because you can hear on the radio everything that’s going on and that certain areas are under attack, but those areas aren’t really of that much strategic importance… so a shop somewhere a couple of miles away isn’t as important as protecting the central, like, controlling hub of the whole of the city... if [the command center] went down, which was where everything was being controlled from, then obviously it would have been a lot worse.

While perceived inaction may be problematic, arrests and the use of force can have a dramatic effect on crowds; one surprising finding for us was that even changes into protective clothing could change crowd behavior. One commander commented, "as soon as we put on the NATO helmets, the bricks start flying" - suggesting additional protective clothing somehow gave permission to protesters to use greater force. Two front-line officers independently concurred, "if we change into the helmets people will start, they’ll raise their level of aggression to match us," and, "if people think that they can actually injure the police, maybe they’ll be less likely to [throw masonry]."
Perhaps the distinctive aspect to the client base for riot police is that they are confronted with crowds whose membership, goals, legitimacy, and power, can all change rapidly. Jake, a former public order trainer described how off-the-shelf approaches were inappropriate in August because one thing that took the police by surprise was the changed profile of offenders:

if you look at the August riots, yes they would have fitted into our disorder model ... but the profile of the offenders changed. The NEET [Not in Employment Education or Training] label would fit a lot of them but not all of them, there was a student-teacher, there was a social worker or a youth worker.

More generally, any crowd may appear unitary and homogeneous, but contain elements pursuing their own agendas. At Tottenham this seemed to be the case with the initial protest by the Duggan family being "hijacked" (Mr. Lammy, MP for Tottenham). Another officer described his most memorable experience policing a U.A.F. counter-demonstration (Unite Against Fascism, an anti-fascist pressure group) that was "hijacked" by more militant protestors, "we were walking round in a snake [a marching cordon], I was having quite a pleasant conversation [with] a group of professionals," when violence erupted unexpectedly, "it just changed within five minutes to the point that there was a horse charge" (mounted officers were called on and used to disperse the crowd).

Conflict Among Stakeholders

The job of riot policing becomes impossible not just because the client base of rioters is illegitimate, but because stakeholders (community leaders, residents, business owners, politicians) have conflicting views about the nature of the problem confronting police, about its causes, and about what would constitute a satisfactory solution. In his opening statement on the riots, the Prime Minister identified
how stakeholder conflict made riot policing impossible, "the police are damned if they do and damned if they don’t. Nowhere is that truer than in public order policing." He continued, "I want to be clear that, as long as officers act within reason and the law, this Home Secretary will never damn the police if they do."

One problem for the police, at all levels, is that what constitutes "within reason and the law" partly depends on judgment, partly on perspective, and partly on the context. A public order specialist described his view of how situations are reviewed:

when its looked at and everyone’s sat down with their cup of tea, [it is] very different to three o’clock in the morning with somebody who appears aggressive and you think "they're trying to kill me."

An MP from Prime Minister Cameron's own party, Nadine Dorries, criticized the lack of robust intervention, "If these riots had broken out in any city or town in Australia or America, the police would have had at their instant disposal water cannon, plastic bullets and tear gas." These sentiments were not uncommon, but command officers rejected these tactical options at the time, and later discounted them in testimony as excessive or inappropriate. One reason was that in August they were dealing with small, highly mobile, remotely coordinated groups, rather than static crowd "stand-offs."

A public order trainer explained how expectations about a traditional British way of policing made interaction between crowds and use of force complex. This British model, "places a high value on tolerance and winning the consent of the public" (Her Majesty's Chief Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2009: 5). He explained:
you have this paradoxical situation where [we] aspire to be a tolerant society and everybody has their freedoms and the police must therefore have limited power, but that limited power does tend to lead to these quite static long drawn-out demonstrations or protests that become unlawful.

A Bronze commander echoed this when discussing concerns that had followed the policing of a G20 summit protest in London two years before the August riots, "the British model of policing still holds good, but in terms of public order it’s creaking just a little bit and there were massive questions about our use of force."

Effective policing also requires cooperation from the public, which may be hardest to secure in the neighborhoods that need it most. Asked about the August riots, Chief Constable Fahy of Greater Manchester testified, “we deal with a very challenging area. There are very high levels of deprivation... you can only do the enforcement if you are getting the information and the support from local people through your long-term relationship and your long-term style of policing.” Tottenham itself has a very troubled history of minority and police relations, but the riots following Mark Duggan's death were not characterized by race. Chief Constable Chris Sims of West Midlands police described them as, "more about greed than anger." Gavin Barwell MP for Croydon Central - South London - identified, "a tiny minority" of "wreckers" who "came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds" (his description was significant since on news media, the emblematic, recurring image of the riots was a burning furniture store in an iconic location of Croydon). Mr. Umunna, MP for Streatham , another London borough with a history of police and minority tension, said, "to racialize this issue is gravely wrong and does our country a great disservice." Front-line officers we spoke to were skeptical the activity they personally policed was in any way linked to race, "people can say that it was because of Mark Duggan being shot in
London, but realistically it wasn’t, it was just burglary, large-scale burglary is all it was” and, "there was no political motivation..it was pure, simple looting... it wasn't for rioting, it was stealing stuff.”

Focusing on stakeholder conflict helped us to identify another difference from street-level bureaucrats. As well as working with crowds, riot police often work in space that is ostensibly public, but somehow becomes tribal and territorial. In discussions of other public order incidents, such as counter-demonstrations, officers described having to protect the rights of highly divisive groups in public spaces - the most frequent cases where this was an issue concerned the policing of football (soccer). While hooliganism is no longer the problem it was in English football, fierce rivalries remain between some clubs. Jake described, his most memorable experience at a football match between Leeds and Manchester United. Leeds fans knew the away buses picked up fans from a particular point and waited there after the game. Some buses were late and he and his colleagues had to, "escort the group of Man Utd fans through probably 10,000 Leeds fans, through a very narrow kind of passageway... it all got confused and actually turned into quite a lot of disorder."

Agency Myth

The unusual and signal feature of August's "BlackBerry riots" (Halliday, 2011), is they spread via closed network, instant messaging. Assistant Chief Constable of West Midlands Police, Sharon Rowe, described the impact of this technology, "[w]e are into a totally new game now." Michael, who policed events in London, emphasized the effects of both mainstream media and information sharing through networks, "it’s almost instant, and they’ve definitely had a feeder impact into why it erupted elsewhere." In Hargrove and Glidewell's terms, technology fuelled a remarkable and rapid weakening of the agency
myth - the idea of the police as powerful and in control of the streets. Acting Commissioner Godwin, reflecting on a key lesson from August, concluded, "the most important thing is that people are not seen to get away with it and there isn’t a consequence."

But, in August 2011, tens of thousands of people across England did believe they could "get away with it" and that because police were powerless in the face of mass disorder, offenses like looting, vandalism and arson would go unpunished. Remote coordination via instant messaging meant rioters were highly mobile and could disperse and regroup very quickly, switching targets in real time - completely unlike the static protests practiced in the public order training we witnessed. The scale of the riots posed other problems for standard operating procedures (SOPs), rendering some conventional public order tactics useless. Asked whether the police should have deployed water cannon or rubber bullets, Chief Constable Fahy of Greater Manchester Police said:

> It was a very fluid situation, fast moving situation. Water cannon have a very short period of time that they can be used, but the fact is the mob would have just run away from them... Rubber bullets, again the whole thing was too fast moving.

Our interviewees at command and front-line confirmed this, "water cannon is really a dispersal tool" (Commander), "systems that we use aren’t designed to cope with that scale of disorder" (Front line officer).

Another relevant agency myth is the police are impartial in important ways - they do not favour any race, they serve all the public, and are apolitical. We are not saying these things are untrue. Nonetheless, protest after Mark Duggan's shooting showed some believed police racial impartiality was a myth.
Tottenham has experienced police and minority tension for many years, with one watershed moment in British policing coming in 1985, after the murder of Constable Keith Blakelock during a riot at Broadwater Farm – a high-density social housing complex. It was from Broadwater Farm that protesters at Duggan's death began their march, at the very origin of the riots (Waddington, 2012). One officer involved in policing the very earliest stages of the riots explained how travelling to events made him and his colleagues extremely anxious:

"of course Tottenham’s got history, you know, with Keith Blakelock, so we knew we were [being driven] to something that had got a historical context and a certain dynamic to it, we all knew about Duggan beforehand, and because it was still coming over the TV, the news channels on our iPhones, we knew the moment we got there, we were going to get committed [seriously involved]"

Another officer, Martin, with four years experience of policing in a Midlands city told us, "in my day-to-day job in the police... some people are still convinced, that the police is a racist organization, [yet] it goes to great strides, more than any other organization, to be as diverse as possible." We found it interesting Martin described the problem as some being "still convinced," which seemingly concedes this was partially true of police in the past. This is not something that we can speak to with our data, but it indirectly highlights a complexity in public order - that could not be replicated in training - which is police need to deal with the legacy of previous police practice, or perceptions of practice, and a collective memory of past grievances. As the officer quoted above indicated, referring to an event almost 30 years earlier, "Tottenham's got history" and "a certain dynamic."

Several officers explained that the agency myth of the police as politically impartial was frequently undermined and that they were seen collectively as representatives of the state, rather than servants of
the public. Sometimes police presence or practice transformed and united otherwise heterogeneous elements of the crowd, as Jason a commander explained, "people turn up to a protest with very different motives... forget their original protest and unite against the police... we become the embodiment of the government in the eyes of the protesters." Offering a much longer, historical view, Andrew recalled policing the intensely political miner's strike (1984/5). He experienced how striking miners would, "see me as the political engine of Maggie Thatcher... just a uniform, representative of [the state] - that was hard and nasty."

Protective riot clothing can weaken the agency myth of the police as public servants because it makes officers more anonymous. Over and above wearing uniforms, it can mean people perceive the police as state representatives rather than public servants. A commander acknowledged this, "you’re presenting yourself as a target, you are more anonymous, you’re dehumanized." A consequence is that this also makes officers less mobile, one explained, "it’s about a stone [14 lbs.] of extra kit once you’ve put it all on and then you carry the shield." This weakens the agency myth in another basic way: an officer in riot gear is less able and less likely to catch someone by chasing them.

Confidence in Professional Authority

Just one month before the riots, the Metropolitan Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson, and an Assistant Commissioner, John Yates, resigned in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal at the News of the World newspaper (Longstaff, 2011). Stephenson's predecessor, Sir Ian Blair had also resigned following the election of the London Mayor, Boris Johnson who publicly called for him to step down, and after what
was called a "sustained period of media annihilation" (Greer and MacLaughlin, 2012: 23). The mayor was asked about this by the Chair of the Select Committee, Keith Vaz, MP:

To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, to lose one Commissioner was a misfortune but to lose both looks like carelessness. What is this problem about retaining Commissioners at the Met [Metropolitan police]?

Though the Mayoral role is new, political and media pressure, and challenges to professional authority are not, certainly when it comes to policing London. In the midst of the 2011 riots both the Home Secretary, Ms Teresa May, and Prime Minister Cameron publicly undermined police authority with comments that were rejected by Sir Hugh Orde, the Chair of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). Ms. May announced she had ordered all Chief Constables to cancel police leave, Orde stated the Home Secretary "had no power whatsoever" to do so (Jones, 2012: 545). At one stage (before the parliamentary debate) Prime Minister Cameron suggested using water cannon and plastic baton rounds which Orde rejected as, "the wrong tactic, in the wrong circumstances" cautioning, "excessive force will destroy our model of policing in the long term" (Hoggett and Stott, 2012: 174).

Public confidence in police authority vanished on the mainstream media as rioters were shown seemingly acting without sanction. Acting Commissioner Godwin explained, "we saw images of looting, which apparently was being untackled... that encouraged a few more to look at the opportunity for smash and grab activity." Joe, a comparatively inexperienced front line officer, reported surprise at one instance where professional authority evaporated during the riots. He saw a crowd of young people in a Birmingham shopping center [mall] ignore the instructions of a senior officer, "the inspector ordered them to clear the centre, no-one really moved, no-one cared, they just sat there watching."
commander, Andrew, told us how criminality resulted from a lack of police authority, "the next day wasn't about Mark Duggan in my view it was about, 'Blimey you know if we put the police at full stretch we can [run] round the corner and then nick everything from Currys' " (a consumer electronics retailer).

The scale and spread of the riots revealed the police were hopelessly outnumbered at times. A member of the public, Lynn Radose, told a Select Committee what happened when her neighbors reported a fire in an apartment building, "the fire service told them they can't get there because there's no police - there weren't any police anywhere, I cannot stress that enough for you." Inspector Bethel (in the Metropolitan Police report 4 Days in August) identified an incident where, "officers were not only the front line, they were the last line" (2012: 42). One commander we interviewed, described his thoughts in August at an incident where he and his colleagues held a crowd back, "the fire brigade are here, the ambulances are here, buildings are being set alight, it’s clear both those emergency services have got to be protected to save life." He described having to "save life" as the most basic of protocols, "preservation of life, prevention, detection of crime, preserving Queen’s peace... your three core things."

One interesting aspect to authority is that responsibility for decision making applies from the front-line up, even in the midst of the seeming chaos of a riot. An assumption we had prior to the research was that riot situations lead to pure command and control leadership, but there were several reasons pure command and control was not realized. One was that British police are generalists - in contrast to most European countries or more decentralized models of policing. One commander explained, "We don’t have a standing army of public order trained police officers, we don’t have a third force in this country like the French... Spanish." Another drew a contrast with the decentralization and variety of U.S. police
forces, "in one location in Virginia for example, if you’re on the university campus, there are four Police services that might come to your assistance depending on the type of the offense."

Locating authority at the front line is necessary, so individual officers remain responsible for their actions. Charles, a public order trainer, explained:

you can be ordered to... run down the road with a shield, but the decision whether you lock that individual up... rests with you... if you’ve got somebody stood in front of you with a brick and they’re just about to throw it... I don’t think there's much of a choice [but] it’s you who has got to stand in the witness box and justify why you arrested, hit them, sprayed them [with gas], used any sort of force.

However, at the front-line, chaos and noise compromises communication. Anthony, a Bronze commander, explained how the nature of leadership changed during riot situations:

Leadership becomes very tactile, words of command aren't necessarily given it's more pushes and shoves, the noise, the helmets, you have to be very, very hands-on. You have to be quite autocratic [but] I'd hate to give an order and it be followed blindly. The opportunity to arrest is always there.

This is significant because the decision to arrest changes the legitimacy of a client and it can also be that an arrest will incite a crowd: a trigger (Adang, 2011) undermining authority and weakening the agency myth of the police as impartial. An added difficulty in terms of police practice and SOP (in England) is that arrests result in two officers being taken off the front line, so officers are conscious they may be putting colleagues at more risk. Conversely, as the events of August 2011 showed, not to arrest can be problematic if perpetrators ignore the authority of officers and are seen to be "getting away with it" (Tim Godwin, Acting Commissioner).
Front line officers we interviewed were very conscious of how their individual practice could quickly change crowd perceptions of police authority. They were also very aware that police practice could affect wider public perceptions through other media. John, a public order trainer described a London embassy protest:

At the very front of the crowd... I was shocked at how many photographers, in quotes, there were. An extremely high number... who were not journalists were presumably instructed in the process. That was very hard to manage, to identify how to deal with them always, constantly making decisions about what you have to do next.

The Police Executive Research Forum has identified parallel issues in the U.S., in describing public perceptions of the use of force, complexities in crowd composition, the effects of arrest, and role of the media, alongside individual officer discretion (Narr et al., 2006).

**Implications**

A limitation of the impossible job label, a "semantic trap" Hargrove and Glidewell themselves identify, is it lends itself to absolute categories. Static, overgeneralized frameworks represent a gap in theoretical understanding (Maranto and Wolf, 2012). We suggest riot policing tests the limits of Hargrove and Glidewell's framework, and this leads us to identify three theoretical extensions - (i) a differentiation between impossible jobs and impossible tasks, (ii) a clearer account of the relationship between street-level bureaucrats and impossible jobs, (iii) a need to revisit the assumption of a stable or unitary client base.
**Impossible Jobs and Impossible Tasks**

Though Hargrove and Glidewell use the terms synonymously (1990: ix), a helpful distinction can be drawn between jobs and tasks. Any "job," such as police officer, provides a source of meaning and sense of self; as well as being an expression of traditions, history and kinds of jurisdiction (Glaeser, 2000). A job is something we understand within a common set of social categories and kinds of membership. Sennett traces the etymology of job to something carried around - indicating there is something to jobs that coheres and transcends particular situations (Sennett, 1998). Whereas jobs are in these senses holistic, tasks can be thought of as the component parts of a job.

For commissioners, any street-level policing task, once aggregated, can translate into their having an "impossible job." This applies whether one considers how officers deal with burglary, drugs, criminal damage, dangerous driving, or a host of other issues. Different stakeholders will always have competing ideas about how resources should be spent, about what the police should prioritize, about what the police are responsible for, and how the police should discharge that responsibility. For street-level police officers, policing riots is only one of the tasks they perform and it is one seldom carried out, "the riots are unique in that the majority of public order isn’t about the riots" (Albert, Public Order Commander); 

"[August was] as close to, you know, a fully blown riot shall we say as I’ve ever done in my 16 years in the job” (Michael, front-line officer). Even for the most highly trained public order police, their job rarely involves such tasks because riots are rare and extreme events. However, when they do occur, policing riots can be "impossible tasks" at the front-line. The difference between impossible and possible tasks becomes clearer if we contrast the training with the reality.
During observation and interviews relating to public order training, officers drew sharp distinctions between training and real life or the field, "public order is so unpredictable that it’s very rare that every incident or evolution of an incident, you are prepared for" (John, Bronze-level commander). Understandably, the challenge of recreating these scenarios was a concern for public order trainers. Jake had worked for seven years as a trainer and described the challenge as being to develop an, "unrealistic capability to get reality into a training scenario." In other words, trainers were expected as a matter of routine to deliver training that reflected the fidelity of public order scenarios, but within the typical constraints of a large bureaucracy, as he described it, "in controlled environments that have to be safe."

As we saw during observation of training, there is an almost paradoxical need for the riot, as an event, to be repeatable - so officers respond consistently across different forces, interpret the law in the same way, and achieve comparable levels of expertise to inform deployment. Above and beyond shared knowledge of SOPs, they also need to be able to cope with danger and risk. Training enables officers to cope with recurrent features of riots that involve risk - "repertoires of contention" (Tilly, 2003), such as "brickwork" (defending oneself against a barrage of bricks), or coping with gasoline bombs. We describe these features of their training as coping with a possible - albeit difficult - task. But certain aspects to riots, which did not seem to be reproducible in training, are impossible at the front line.

In the August riots there were some particularly striking problems, owing to the sheer scale of rioting, its dispersal, opportunism both in looting and in targeting of the police, real time remote coordination through instant messaging technology, the role of mainstream media. Comparing notes on training exercises with observation of riot footage in August 2011, we could see the sheer scale of disorder
meant many police tactics could not be deployed, for instance: formation of cordons, alignment of shields to protect against a barrage, crowd containment tactics, deployment of specialist arrest teams. These tactics were learned doing difficult, but possible tasks, but they did not work when confronted with the impossible - when the client base had grown exponentially, there was no confidence in professional authority, and the agency myth had evaporated.

The distinction between difficult and impossible tasks was well underlined in one comment from Arthur, a Bronze commander, describing specialist public order training:

[it] is hard and... arduous, it’s you know, two, three days long, very, very physical, very tiring, very demanding going into large disused hospitals, disused hotels where we have our trainers that would dress up... all padded... and, you know, they’ve got baseball bats and it’s not uncommon to chuck a fridge down the stairs when you’re on your way out.

Arthur was describing training at a higher intensity than he was ever likely to face, but explained, "The danger and the level of fear and anxiety in real life is greater because it’s not training." A former trainer, Adam, described this saying:

At the back of their mind everybody has still got that safety net that you can blow the whistle and stop it, you can’t do that with reality... down an alleyway or outside a club or at a fight or what not, no-one can blow a whistle and say, “Checkmate” [a phrase shouted to indicate an exercise was finished].

A feature of some rioting, which cannot be recreated, is the collective will and force of a highly hostile crowd. It would not be correct to say such crowds do not play by any rules, because they can act in ways that are coordinated and purposeful, but they certainly have different rules. Andrew described a scene he
was confronted with during the August riots, where, overnight, people had divided a street by dragging a huge plastic chute from a building site across it. They filled this with debris and set fire to it:

To my amazement I then saw little teams of rioters coming round from the side street of Aldi [a supermarket] pushing shopping trolleys loaded with bricks and then you had people taking it in turns to lob [throw] bricks at us... and I thought "it doesn't take long does it." You know that people that have just been really aggressive and not coordinated a few hours ago, to actually... they are now organized and they have got a logistic train and are turning up and they've got people who can only throw bricks until exhausted and they were just taking it in turns.

As we observed, defending oneself from missiles is a common feature of public order training, and a routinizable task, which the police can train for, but they cannot recreate the kind of opposition that comes from a sustained, coordinated and organized force such as this. These "rioters" transformed this part of London, flagrantly defying an agency myth of the police as in control or as authority figures. They raided a building site to set up a supply chain of ammunition, worked in teams, and rested in shifts with no thought of health and safety, or budget, or an eye on when the exercise has to finish.

*Impossible Jobs and Street-Level Bureaucrats*

Riot policing provides an opportunity to clarify the relationship between the conceptual categories of impossible jobs and street-level bureaucrats. Hargrove and Glidewell's commissioner is, by definition, not at street-level. As we see it, part of the logic informing Hargrove and Glidewell's framework is that there is a kind of multiplier effect as you move up the chain of command. Street-level bureaucrats' jobs require discretion and the need to grapple with problems that are not solvable, so in the Lipskyian sense they are sometimes inexorably dilemmatic. This difficulty is amplified for commissioners because they become responsible for the aggregation of these street-level dilemmas and need to try to manage public
impressions of the agency myth, cope with stakeholders with conflicting goals and operate in a highly charged political context. However, in contemporary literature, impossible job is now used more widely and so we think there are fruitful connections to be made between impossible jobs and street-level bureaucracy.

A key finding here is that in riot policing the four dimensions of impossibility are considerations all the way through the command chain. It can be impossible at the frontline to deal with a crowd that suddenly discovers itself to be powerful by virtue of numbers and common purpose (Reicher, 2011). This might have parallels in the impossible task a police commander faces trying to establish dialogue in an area with a history of poor police-community relations (Holgersson and Knutsson 2011; Stott, 2011). Riot police deal with crowds whose behavior can change their legitimacy in real time and who often have heterogenous interests. This is unlike the dilemmas of the street-level bureaucrat, who grapples with the complexity of meshing the individual case onto bureaucratic policy and whose, "determinations are focused entirely on the individual" (Lipsky, 2010: 8).

Front-line riot police may be part of a small sub-category of public servants who are both "street-level bureaucrats" and have to do the "impossible." This is partly because individual police officers have unique powers in comparison with other street-level bureaucrats - the powers to arrest and detain, and the right to use force. It is partly because they deal with crowds. Also, and unlike most other "street-level" bureaucrats, riot police work outside, in public spaces, in full view of the media or (nowadays) anyone with a camera in their phone. For some, police officers also represent a common enemy in a way that other street-level bureaucrats do not. How effectively, or ineffectively, they carry out riot policing
affects crowd behavior in real time, intensifying conflict and potentially pushing people into actions that are illegitimate as protest escalates into riot. Accordingly, just as command-level decisions can, policing practice at the front-line in a riot can directly affect each of - client legitimacy, the extent of conflict among stakeholders, and perceptions of the agency myth and of professional authority.

The Client Base Can be Volatile

Another important implication for the impossible jobs framework is that the client base of riot police can be highly volatile. Police action or inaction can cause elements within the crowd to change allegiances and switch focus, or to become violent; or it can influence a much wider public through the media and messaging. Sometimes inaction emboldens would be rioters, on other occasions, any kind of escalation or intervention such as containment or an arrest can be inflammatory.

Volatility in the client base was a recurring feature of our data, and here our findings speak to Maranto and Wolf's (2012) concern that the labels associated with impossible jobs may be static and over generalized. Client base volatility is one reason front-line riot policing can be impossible, not only because the client base itself is not static, but because changes to it influence each of the other criteria (leader authority, agency myth, stakeholder conflict). The August riots demonstrated this strikingly and in ways that have implications for understanding contemporary society, as the latest technology facilitated "copycatting."

As well as volatility in the client base, in public order policing there can be highly organized and trenchant forms of opposition. This brings additional complexity, in that some groups use public order
situations as a platform to continue a campaign against the police, whom they see as representative of the state, or because they have pre-existing grievances, or are seeking media exposure. Mark, a police officer for over 20 years, distinguished between spontaneous public order situations and those involving highly organized elements.

It's fine in my mind where it is lawful protest, where it starts to go at the edges and the splinter groups and what have you join in and then the mark gets overstepped into what might be spontaneous disorder [but] you've got people who're almost trained in it like we are [Mark laughs] and we have seen increasing evidence of people you know almost full-time anarchists who know quite a lot about our tactics and they've got their own... professional anarchists eventually turn up and start anchoring themselves or chaining themselves to trees and going up you know doing all these fairly professional organized things in order to present obstacles to the police.

Mark accepts, pragmatically, that lawful protest can spill over - spontaneous disorder was "fine" as in to be expected. But his tone was one of bemusement when it came to those who were "professional" and apparently solely motivated by antagonizing the police. A further complexity is that some parts of these crowds continue to act lawfully, while others break the law. In these situations, what makes policing at the front-line impossible is that there is no one thing that is "the client base," because one cannot distinguish easily between lawful and unlawful, even though members of a crowd may be in extremely close spatial and temporal proximity to one another, and to law enforcement officers.

Conclusion

Our first contribution has been to extend theoretically the framework Hargrove and Glidewell use (client illegitimacy, conflict among stakeholders, low confidence in authority, and weak agency). We show these categories remain useful, but in some cases they can understimate impossibility. More specifically, impossibility need not be restricted to the commissioner level for some street-level bureaucrats, because
in riot policing these criteria are intertwined and central to understanding decisions at the front-line. This has implications for other settings where frontline decisions directly affect client legitimacy, such as in mental health, or corrections (see Henderson, 2013 for an example relating to emergency medical services).

Second, our analysis of training shows differences between tasks that are difficult but possible (defending against gasoline bombs), and tasks that are impossible (placating an angry crowd, or recreating the social dynamics of a riot). There is a practical implication here for police agencies as bureaucracies. Police agencies and trainers may be more effective if they have greater clarity about which tasks are possible (and routinizable) and which are impossible (and non-routinizable).

A third contribution is to show that one challenge in public order policing is the client base can be highly volatile, and this often depends on the decisions commanders and front-line officers take. In riots this can change for entire groups in moments, and in some situations, client legitimacy is interdependent with the agency myth. One lesson from August was that rioting spread (the client base grew) because people perceived the police as powerless (when the agency myth vanished).

Fourth, a practical implication is to consider how to manage real time interdependencies between client legitimacy, authority and agency myth. This may be important in future crises. A related, relevant practical implication is to consider the legacy of this crisis. While the police were confronted with apparently overwhelming odds, ultimately order was restored. This was done without water cannon, tear gas, firearms, or deployment of the military - all things which some people called for. This may even represent an opportunity to reaffirm the agency myth and differentiating elements of British policing.
Calling a category of jobs impossible could reflect pessimism about the prospects for effective public administration (Maranto and Wolf, 2012) or, conversely, lionize public managers since they somehow do the impossible (Dobel, 1992). That describing jobs as impossible could lead to lionization is problematic in this context because, as Nicholson-Crotty and O'Toole (2004) identify, much research in law-enforcement has been anecdotal, based on single cases or managers. This study addresses some of these limitations through fieldwork that combines methods and gathers and analyzes different data sources over time. This offers scope to re-examine conceptual frameworks that are our collective theoretical currency in analyzing the complexities of public administration.

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Notes

1. An alternative to "riot," which has specific legal connotations in our context, is "severe public disorder." We use "riots" to enhance accessibility, partly because "public order" can describe an ongoing approach to control or exclusion (Beckett and Herbert, 2008); rather than response to extreme events.
2. We agree with an anonymous reviewer that in a more decentralized policing model, such as the U.S. there may be greater opportunity for Police Chiefs to enhance their standing by dealing effectively
with riots - a notable exception being Daryl Gates' handling of the 1991 Los Angeles riots (McConnell, 2011).

3. In analysis we looked across data sources for commonality and overlap to identify recurring themes and to support triangulation (Herzog, 1993; Nesbit et al, 2011). We also looked within each data source, for features of accounts or scenarios that were unique and different with a focus on "privileging the individual voice" (Borins, 2012: 168; see also Dodge, Ospina and Foldy, 2005; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000; Ospina and Dodge, 2005). This was important since we found consistent support for a theme featuring in our earliest interviews - that each public order incident had its own unique complexities. In presenting our analysis, we map findings onto the four themes of the impossible jobs framework.

4. Sir Robert Mark (1972-1977) resigned after publicly disagreeing with the Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, and criticising legislation he felt made senior officers more responsible to political appointees (Hobbs, 2010). His successor Sir David McNee (1977-1982) faced similar challenges following large scale rioting at Brixton (London), where a resulting inquiry criticized police tactics. He was later asked to resign by the Home Secretary when an intruder broke into Buckingham Palace and came into the Queen's room (he refused). McNee's successor, Commissioner Kenneth Newman (1982-1987), though widely acknowledged as a public order specialist, was heavily criticized for the way he handled the Broadwater Farm riot and was said by the founder of Policing, the magazine of the Police Federation to have been, "fortunate not to face a public inquiry" (Judge, 2007: 29).
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