

High-Risk Motorcycling: A Practice Theory Perspective

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Abstract

In an effort to elucidate a deep understanding of the experience of high-risk motorcycling we employ a practice theory perspective; drawing out connections between the practice, the consumption of objects, and the meanings surrounding both. Using the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM), we offer possible explanations as to why, in the face of troubling accident statistics, some motorcyclists continue to drive at excessive speeds. Narrative accounts portray high-risk motorcycling practice as autotelic, impulsive edgework, incorporating a strong connection between rider and machine, and embedded with symbolic, emotional values that cannot be accounted for by traditional rational choice models. Our findings allow for the potential of policy makers to address high-risk motorcycling practice in ways more meaningful to those engaged in the practice.

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Introduction

The world reliably divides into two neat portions depending along which axis you skewer it. Those who do, those who don't; those who would love to, those who would never dream of it if they had all eternity. See how fast the two halves split and fall away when you mention you ride a motorcycle. Side one: Really? Oh, I've always wanted to ride one! Side two: Really? It's so dangerous.

Holbrook Pierson (1997, p. 45)

Fatality rates among motorcyclists in Ireland are among the highest in Europe. According to the Road Safety Authority (2009) motorcyclists are over-represented in collision statistics, representing less than 2% of licensed vehicles but 10% of road deaths. Further, OECD figures show that a motorcyclist is two to three times more likely to be killed in Ireland than in other European countries (Road Safety Authority, 2007). Male drivers in the age group 17-39 have the highest casualty rates, while drivers in the age group 20-24 have the highest fatality rates. The most common factors contributing to accidents include excessive speed, going to the wrong side of the road, and improper overtaking (Road Safety Authority 2009).

Though bikers tend to be aware of these statistics, the numbers purchasing motorcycles continue to rise. This may be because experts' statistical explanations of motorcycle accidents and motorcyclists' understandings of those accidents differ considerably. Indeed, Bellaby and Lawrenson (2001) suggest that these different 'truths' may exacerbate motorcycle accidents as expert risk assessment produces roads that do not take adequate account of motorcyclist safety. Meanwhile, motorcyclists' understandings see

them push the limits of their abilities and machines. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) suggests that meanings associated with motorcycling may permeate enthusiasts' lives and facilitate their culture's social communication system (Arnould *et al.* 2002). Culture, here, represents bikers' "horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behaviour and sense-making interpretations more likely than others" (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 869).

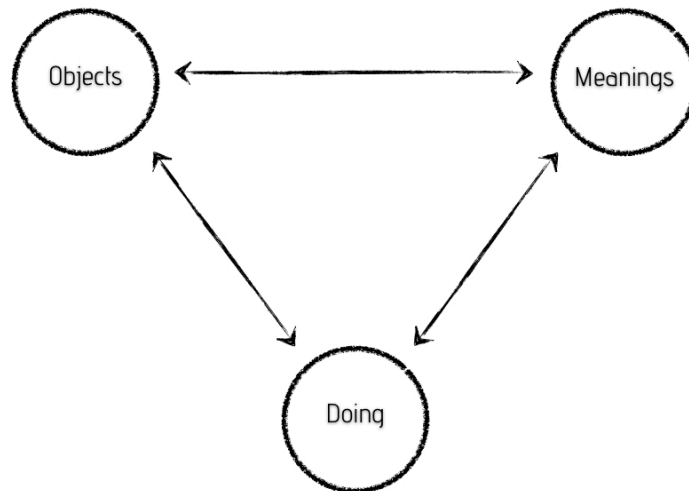
However, CCT has focussed almost exclusively on the meanings and symbolic properties of commodities and their use in identity construction (see Watson and Shove 2008). In this way, CCT has provided only a partial view of consumption. Practice theory (Schatzki 2002) helps to overcome these shortcomings by embedding the meanings of consumption within "a complex of doing things" (Reckwitz 2002, p. 258). Consumption, after all, is an outcome of practices, the 'doings' of people:

"Consumption is not itself a practice ... Items appropriated and the manner of their deployment are governed by the conventions of the practice ... The patterns of similarity and difference in possessions and use within and between groups of people ... may thus be seen as the corollary of the way the practice is organised", (Warde 2005, p. 137).

Practice theory, then, opens up our horizons of investigation in order that we pay attention not only to consumption meanings *per se*, but also to practices themselves and to the consumption of material objects necessitated by those practices. Thus, for Magaudda (2011), building on the work of Schatzki (2002) and Shove and Pantzar (2005), practices are constituted by three elements: doings, objects and representations (see figure 1). The research we report here, represents just a small part of a wider programme of investigation into this tripartite scheme of practice. Specifically, we

confine our attention to the practice of high-risk motorcycling. Such practice demands the consumption of particular motorcycles rather than others, and necessitates a particular kind of relationship between rider and machine. High-risk motorcycling practice also draws upon a limited set of cultural meanings and understandings. Finally, we focus here on the internal rewards generated by the practice: “Judgements of performance are made internally with respect to the goals and aspirations of the practice itself, and proficiency and commitment deliver satisfaction and self esteem”, (Warde 2005, p. 148). There are, of course, external rewards associated with the practice also, but these are beyond the remit of this paper.

Figure 1: The Circuit of Practice (Magaudda 2011).



We begin with a theoretical exploration of the ‘doing’ of high-risk motorcycling, theorising it as edgework, and making sense of the argument that motorcyclists often do not see speeding as a risky activity (Bellaby and Lawrenson 2001). Subsequently, we address Dant’s (2004) theory of assemblage, indicating how the connections between rider (consumer) and bike (object) foreground the importance of road craft. We then follow with a brief acknowledgement of the meanings surrounding high-risk motorcycling practice, meanings connected to deviance, liberation and control. Next we outline the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method used to elicit motorcyclists’ narratives and provide an empirical account of high-risk motorcycling practice. We follow the data with conclusions and recommendations.

Doings, Objects and Meanings

While at its most basic, motorcycling provides a means of transport, it may also be autotelic, engaged in for its own sake (Bellaby and Lawrenson 2001). In this way, motorcycling possesses a high degree of expressive functionality, foregrounding the journey rather than the destination (Broughton *et al.* 2009). High-risk motorcycling, including speeding, may be characterised as edgework, where riders participate in practices that carry the potential risk of death. Lyng (1990, p. 871) argues: “edgework involves not only activity-specific skills but also a general ability to maintain control of a situation that verges on complete chaos”. The frame has been usefully employed in research addressing such diverse fields as Internet stock trading (Zwick 2006), anorexia (Gailey 2009), young male offenders (Collisson 1996), and search and rescue groups (Lois 2001). The *edge* is the boundary between “life versus death, consciousness versus

unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and environment versus a disordered self and environment” (Lyng 1990, p. 857).

In pursuing the *edge*, motorcyclists push themselves to/past the thresholds of human capability in their efforts to establish the potential of their objects. Natalier (2001, p. 71) draws attention to the notion of the ‘good ride’ among motorcyclists; the meeting point of rider ability, machine capability, and the reactions of both to the environment. Motorcycles, then, often demand a high level of skill from their riders. Furthermore, it can be difficult for riders to “mentally learn how to use ... [motorcycles] ... to embody this knowledge and to transform it into routine practices” (Ilmonen 2004, p. 32). During this ‘work of hybridization’, rider and motorcycle for a time almost become one (Preda 1999): “The embodiment of technique is evidenced at the rider-machine interface, indeed, interaction, idealised as a melding of the motorcyclist and the machine into a single unit” (Natalier 2001, p. 71). In previous studies this collaboration of human and machine has attracted the term ‘cyborg’ (Harraway, 1991). Cyborg theory alludes to a situation whereby the machine replaces or enhances human body parts. Here, we avoid cyborg theory in favour of Dant’s (2004) theory of *assemblage*. Rather than dehumanizing the rider to a machine/human hybrid, we emphasise the relationship between rider and motorcycle as a “temporary assemblage within which the human remains complete in his or her self... neither the human driver nor the [bike] acting apart could bring about the types of action that the assemblage can” (Dant 2004, p. 62). In the case of motorcycles, the more advanced the machine the greater the requirements made of the rider:

“technological change for the motorcycle-rider may demand heightened bodily agility and dexterity, to handle the physical forces and consequences of faster

accelerating (and stopping) machines and to manage the risks of collisions with car-driver assemblages increasingly cocooned and anaesthetised from the presence of other road users” (Pinch and Reimer 2011, p. 10).

Indeed, the motorcycle impacts upon the performance of the practice in significant ways. Riding a supersport model is three times more likely to result in a fatality than riding on a touring motorcycle (Haworth *et al.* 2009), suggesting that bike design encourages particular types of riding. As the interaction between consumer and object increases in intensity, so too can the emotional value that the rider places on the machine (Ilmonen 2004), and the motorcycle becomes integral to the rider’s identity.

The study of skydiving by Celsi *et al.* (1993) represents the seminal work within CCT on high-risk leisure pursuits and provides some useful insights into the motivational factors underlying participation in such practices. These motives include the desire by the individual to create an alternative identity, enjoy the bond of community, and experience feelings of transcendence. The search for identity through high-risk consumption can be interpreted as a means of escaping the traditional identities assigned to people by society. Opportunities to express individual creativity in the workplace are often stifled by the repetitive nature of mass production. As a consequence, leisure consumption emerges as an alternative route to the creation of a satisfactory sense of self and we see a concomitant increase in participation rates in high-risk leisure activities such as skydiving (Lyng 1990), BASE jumping (Ferrell *et al.* 2001) and motorcycling. For Lyng (1990), edgework is rooted in the notion of the *impulsive self* (Turner 1976), a self not regulated by the mundane and restrictive nature of working life within capitalist institutions. This *impulsive self* can be expressive, instantaneous and self directed. Although, identity is

comprised of both a sense of *institutional self* and *impulsive self*, Turner (1976) cites a growing tendency among individuals in society to forge identities using the impulsive self. According to Lyng (1990), getting to grips with this institutional/impulsive dialectic has the potential to explain why people engage in edgework. For motorcyclists, speeding, for example, may be justified as the rejection of expert systems, characterised as symptomatic of the institutional side of life (Natalier 2001).

Laurendeau (2006, p. 591) explored the social construction of meaning in his study of skydivers, stating:

“Jumpers draw on socially constructed knowledge as they make choices about the hazards of the sport in an effort to manage the risks involved ... this process is about being aware of one’s capabilities, one’s level of experience and the jumping environment”.

Knowledge is constructed by motorcyclists through official training, exposure to media representations, communal interaction and, most importantly, through experience (Natalier 2001). Official motorcycle training promotes responsible motorcycling, that is careful and safe. However, meanings surrounding the motorcycle are undeniably connected to speed, and beyond that to liberation and rebellion: “Speed and freedom in modernity are intrinsically linked, and the motorcycle, quite obviously, is the most striking symbol of this fusion”, (Rosa 2010, n.p.). Moreover, Holmes (2007) suggests that as early as the turn of the twentieth century, magazines such as *Motor Cycling*, were depicting motorcyclists as speed-loving, law-breaking outsiders. Since those early days a fairly consistent picture of the ‘outlaw biker’ (Austin *et al.* 2010) has emerged, from movies such as *The Wild One*, to television series such as *Sons of Anarchy* and general

media journalism. These representations reinforce rebellion as an important element of the ideal biker identity, but otherwise do not necessarily speak to those engaged in high-risk motorcycling. Rather, motorcycling as edgework is best encapsulated by the subcultural hero *Ghostriider*. A search for *Ghostriider* on Youtube returns over 11,500 results. The top result, with 16 million views, shows our hero performing insane stunts at top speed on busy public streets and motorways in Sweden, all the while being pursued by police.

Interaction with other motorcyclists allows for experiences to be shared and may also facilitate a “policing of the edge” (Laurendeau and van Brunschot 2006). Meanwhile, regular performance of the practice, engaging with its sheer physicality, reinforces notions of riding as an extraordinary liberating experience (Pinch and Reimer 2011).

Laurendeau (2006) further outlines the variety of ways in which edgeworkers justify accidents within their chosen practice. He notes that some edgeworkers explain away accidents by referring to the absence of the *right stuff*, though it is not their sole means of justification. Riders who engage in high-risk motorcycling often contextualise the mishaps of others in ways that allow them to avoid questioning their own ability to operate on the edge. In some circumstances they will use *fate* as an explanation, or interpret their own close calls as “momentary lapses in concentration” (Laurendeau 2006, p. 596). This allows them to utilise their loss of control as a personal development experience, from which they will benefit in the future.

Methodology

Current research in the field of road safety is largely focused on quantitative analysis of statistical data derived from motorcycle collisions. This research is invaluable in that it affords us greater understanding of the tangible factors involved in motorcycle accidents. However, such a methodology fails to adequately address the cultural forces that combine to structure the social, material and affective dimensions of motorcycle ownership. As a consequence, we focus specifically on these cultural forces, acknowledging at the same time that such a focus produces just another partial set of ‘truths’ (Bellamy and Lawrenson 2001). In generating insight into cultural forces we adopt a narrative approach which treats participants as “culturally informed actors, engaging in their chosen activity in an ongoing, reflexive manner” (Haigh and Crowther 2005, p. 556). Narratives are not necessarily grounded in fact but are a representation of experiences encoded with both symbolism and meaning (McAdams and Ochsberg 1998). The stories we tell about our lives allow us to construct the experiences we live through (Schiffrin 1996) and offer a method of understanding these experiences and communicating them to others (Bruner 1990). By studying motorcyclists’ narratives we shed light on their relationships with their bikes. To do this we must pay specific attention to “the way that individuals recount their histories – what they emphasise or leave out; their roles as heroes, villains, or victims in the plot; their self talk; the way they talk about others” (Stern *et al.* 1998, p. 199).

In evoking consumer narratives we adopt a biographic-narrative interview type model (BNIM) proposed by Wengraf (2001). These interviews incorporate three connected

subsessions within the overall session. The process starts with a single question aimed at inducing narrative (SQUIN). During this process researchers' "interventions are kept to a minimum and drained of any particular content, for as long as possible you give up control, refuse to take up offers of partial control and maintain the maximum of power asymmetry *against* yourself" (Wengraf 2001, p. 113). Thus, we ensure participants construct their biographical narratives alone. After this process the second subsession follows in a similar manner, this time focusing on topic questions aimed at inducing narrative (TQUINs). Suffice to say the questions become slightly more specific i.e. asking for more story about topics raised during SQUIN. A final subsession focuses both on questions arising from preliminary analysis of SQUIN and TQUIN, and theoretical and practical questions arising regarding the SQUIN-BNIM narrative interview approach.

In carrying out the interviews we adhered strictly to Wengraf's (2001) techniques. In the first session of the interviews we began by using the SQUIN technique. Here, a conscious effort was made to avoid promoting or interfering with the participants' responses. These sessions typically lasted between 20-40 minutes. During a short break between sessions we highlighted topics which would be used in the second session. Next, questioning techniques adhered to the TQUIN technique. Narrative inducing questions were drawn up based on relevant topics raised in the SQUIN session. These sessions typically lasted around 30 minutes and were followed by a third and final session where further narrative responses were required.

Participants were selected on the basis of their belonging to the core demographic for motorcycling accidents and fatalities (Road Safety Authority 2009), and having had a minimum of three years experience driving motorcycles. The purpose of selecting from this sample was to utilise those engaged in high-risk practice as “agents of meaning” (McDonald 2001), where their experience is vital in allowing them to create sufficient depth in their biographical narratives. In total five participants were interviewed, all male and aged between 18-25.

Leon, 23 years old, Builder, Provisional License: Leon had his first experience of motorcycling while driving a 50cc scooter at the age of 12. He drove his “first proper bike” at the age of 16. Since then he has owned a Honda NS1 75 and two Honda CBR 250’s. According to Leon these bikes are “for people that were obsessed with just going fast”.

Eoin, 22 years old, Student, Full License: Eoin started driving Honda 50’s in the fields at the age of 8. By the age of 12 he had moved to a Yamaha RXS 100. At 14 he had moved onto his first racing bike, a Honda NSR 125cc. Since then he has gradually moved up to a Kaxasaki z1000.

Jimmy, 22 years old, Carpenter, Full License: Jimmy has been driving bikes since the age of 16. His first bike was an Aprilla RS 125. Since then he has owned a Suzuki Bandit 600 and Suzuki GSXR1000

John, 25 years old, Student, Provisional License: John started motorcycling on a 50cc scooter at the age of 16. Since then he has had a Yamaha TDR 125 and a Honda Hornet 250.

Dave 25 years old, Single, Unemployed Science Graduate, bought his first motorcycle, a Yamaha RXS100 at the age of 21. A self-confessed 'sports bike man', he feels this type of bike is best suited to his particular type of driving. Recently he bought a Kawasaki Ninja R250. He plans to take the test for his full license in the near future.

Doings

Motorcycling is a practice often undertaken for its own sake. Narrative accounts describe how riding a motorcycle is an experiential practice, with intrinsic motivation, enjoyment and pleasure (Broughton and Walker 2009), sometimes affording the rider respite from the stresses and strains of everyday life.

When you get a new one, you can't describe the feeling ... savage! Like starting on the [Honda] Varedero ... First I wouldn't go over 40 miles an hour. I used to ... polish it every evening when I would get home from work. Just spinning, tipping around on it. It didn't bother me what speed I was doing. I just loved ... driving it ... I suppose what interests me is that sometimes if I was pissed off I would just put on all me gear and I would go off in the rain. When you're on the bike you're just away from everything. It clears your head. It calms you down ... and you kinda get something out of your system. [Eoin]

When you're having fun on the bike there isn't time for thinking about anything else. You know ... you're concentrating on controlling the bike ... you're concentrating on where you're positioned on the road ... you're looking out for what people in cars are going to do ... That's a lot of thinking, well it is for me anyway. You know you don't really realise you're doing all this thinking but with all of that going on you don't really have time to think about the things that wreck your head ... Like, when I'm driving I'm not thinking about how I'm going to get a job. I'm not worried about the fact I've forty eight euro in the bank. I'm not

listening to my girlfriend blowing the head off me about all these things either ...
You're on your own, doing your thing and that's it. [Dave]

Both Eoin and Dave circulate around the idea that high-risk motorcycling takes you away from mundane reality. In Eoin's case it offers momentary escape, allowing him to clear his head. For Dave, controlling the bike requires such concentration that everything else fades into the background, there simply isn't any opportunity to think about the demands of day-to-day life. More powerfully, Dave indicates that while media reports of motorcycle accidents have the ability to make him stop and think, the transcendent nature of high-risk motorcycling inevitably means that such thoughts are firmly relegated to the background as the practice takes over.

Everyone knows about the statistics that are out there. I mean, after every weekend you can read about someone that's been killed off a bike. Sometimes it would make you think ... You know, you are aware of it. But I think you always think that it is going to be someone else. It's hard to really connect with it when you don't know the people involved ... I mean, if someone that I know was killed off a bike, I'm sure that would have a huge effect on me. But I don't know if reading about it in the paper has that big an effect. You kind of just get used to it ... I think when you see the scene of the crash on the news that can have more effect. When you see the bike all smashed up it hits home. Then you get an idea of just how fragile we all are. That image might sit with you for a while. You know, you might be a bit more cautious when you're on the bike. But after a while that image fades and then you just slip back into your usual driving style ... When you're out enjoying yourself on the bike all that other stuff just fades away into the background. I suppose in some ways that's the beauty of the bike. I'm not saying it right but that's the way it is.
[Dave]

The autotelic nature of high-risk motorcycling, and edgework generally, demands that practitioners constantly push the *edge* (Zwick 2005). Those engaged in high-risk motorcycling skilfully negotiate the *edge* to avoid physical harm. Evidence indicates that speed is the key requirement that separates high-risk motorcycling practice from everyday motorcycling.

I always felt like I was racing to get wherever I was going in as fast a time as I could. Like ... if I didn't drive like that I'd feel like the spin wasn't really worthwhile 'cause I wasn't concentrating fully. [John]

John's trip is not about getting to the destination but about pushing himself to arrive there in the fastest possible time. The journey is not worthwhile unless he is constantly pushing his personal capabilities. Jimmy's narrative enlightens us as to the complexities of the spontaneity/constraint dialectic represented by the impulsive self and institutional self.

I just wanted to get out of school so that I could get a job and then get a proper bike. That's pretty much what I ended up doing. I got out of school when I was 16, and I got a job working with my uncle ... I used to love going to work in the morning ... I could stay in bed till about half-eight every morning. I used to love going past all the traffic on my way to work. I always felt like I had one up on all the people sitting in their cars. I wasn't sitting there waiting like everyone else. It was always a good start to the day, I felt like I was ahead ... I think one day it dawned on me though that I was driving to work every day just to pay for the bike. I mean the bike was the thing that gave me the freedom but at the same time I had spent so much ... money on it, it meant that I had to go to work to keep paying for it. It's a bit of a contradiction in that way. I suppose it felt like that at the time 'cause it was the only real cost I had. I was still living at home for free and I didn't really put my money into anything else ... I suppose whatever you decide to put your money into is going to do that to you. But it's something that always stuck with me. [Jimmy]

Jimmy explains that he feels a sense of freedom as he passes the rest of the traffic on his way to work. Exhibiting a high degree of personal reflexivity, he becomes aware of a contradiction, that although he may experience momentary escape from confinement while motorcycling he is faced with the reality that the practice necessitates consumption which in turn forces him to engage with the institutional side of life. He realises that the object of escape is also the object of confinement. This serves as a harsh reminder of the practicalities of escaping the confines of capitalism through any form consumption.

While pushing the edge is always on the agenda for these motorcyclists, they each emphasise the notion of control. Being in and maintaining control are central to edgework practices (Lyng 1990).

Yeah ... because you get to know the bike so well you feel like you're invincible on it. So the pressure is on you to drive that bike like you've mastered it every time you get on it. If you're not driving it fully, you're disinterested and you don't get that buzz ... You're not even concentrating really because you're just floating along. Whereas ... when you are trying to get somewhere quickly you're zoned in and switched on. You're pushing the bike to its limits and it's doing the same to you. [John]

Here, John explains that in order to maintain control motorcyclists need to ride on the *edge*. When he's not pushing himself and the bike then his concentration wavers, and that's when accidents occur. As Eoin intimates, the practice of high-risk motorcycling also requires the motorcyclist to maintain the bike in top condition.

I'll definitely keep up the service on it and I'll keep it clean. I'll keep the chain tight ... 'cause if the chain came off it ... and it happened me before ... I was trying to get the last out of a chain 'cause I didn't have any money when I was on the Varese. It just hopped off like and it got tangled in around and it locked up the wheel. I was doing about 60 miles an hour, it marked all the swing arm. After that then I kind of looked after the chain. I make sure the wheel is tight. With the tubeless tires they don't ever go flat. If you get a puncture you'll know it will kind of stay hard. On the old Honda's with the spoked wheels if you get a blow out it was a big deal. They were really dangerous. [Eoin]

Objects

Participants in this study spoke openly of their deep emotional attachment to their machines. These emotions are best encapsulated in tales of great financial sacrifice.

The first bike cost me €2,600 to insure ... a lot considering I was probably earning €4 an hour working a part-time job ... It took a lot to actually get on the road. That shows the obsession, I was actually prepared to pay twice what the bike was worth just to be allowed drive on the road ... I had hassle with my parents since I got this bike. My father told me he didn't want to spend the rest of his life looking after me in a wheelchair. He really went to town on me. He wouldn't talk to me. [Eoin]

In such narratives the motorcyclist often becomes the valiant hero driven by an obsession, fighting against all odds to ensure ownership of the motorcycle. The part of the villain is played by the institutions (e.g. insurance companies) and people (e.g. parents) that stand in the way of this ultimate goal (Stern *et al.* 1998). Over time, this relationship between motorcyclist and bike grows so strong that the two become like one.

Yeah ... it's like I was saying before. After a certain time on a bike you get to a stage where you feel like you have mastered it. You know everything about how the bike runs, exactly how it handles. You get right down to knowing all the little peculiarities that each bike will have ... When you get to that stage it's almost like the bike becomes a part of you. [John]

Motorcyclists are also acutely aware of the fact that their bikes configure the practice itself, enabling and encouraging alternative strategies of movement (Pinch and Reimer 2011). The narrative accounts shared by informants provide insights into the impact of the motorcycle on their willingness/ability to engage in high-risk practice.

At the moment I drive a Kawasaki Ninja 250R. I think it's some job ... It's the latest version of a Kawasaki bike that has been around for a long time. They have redesigned it and I think it's the best 250 sports bike that is on the market. Its definitely one of the fastest anyway ... I mean it still only has a 250 engine but I think it looks like it could be a much bigger to people who don't know much about bikes ... They raised up the seating position as well so it looks a lot more like a sports bike and it has that sports bike feel when you're sitting on it. I like that feel you know ... I like the seating position ... because you have complete control. It allows you to dip into corners and really get around them. I think it's harder going on the driver ... physically. You have to exert yourself more and after a while you can start to feel a bit uncomfortable because you're crouched over so much but it's worth it ... With the ninja there is a lot of pressure down on your wrist because of the seating position. But it's okay ... you get used to it. [Dave]

Here, Dave highlights the fact that the design of the bike makes certain demands of the motorcyclist while also allowing for the degree of control necessary for high-risk practice. Eoin also alludes to the influence of the bike on motorcycling style. "Reddening

the clocks” is his terminology for the motorcyclist driving the motorcycle to its maximum limit.

I know a fella ... and if he was going for a bike he wouldn't pick anything except a racing style. He wouldn't pick anything where you would sit up straight. I think its just for pure speed. Get down in the clocks and ... redden it. [Eoin]

Jimmy describes how it takes time to get to know a motorcycle. In these early stages the rider is cautious as he begins to embody the skills required to operate the motorcycle with success (Illmonen 2004).

You just get a connection with a bike after you have been riding it for a certain amount of time ... You think you know everything about how the bike handles and what your capabilities are on it. When I feel like the bike has become a part of me I'm over the stage of being cautious on it ... At the start, when I'm getting used to it, I take it easy until I'm confident on it. But once I feel like I know it inside out and it's a part of me, then I start pushing it and seeing what I can do. [Jimmy]

Once these skills have become embodied, temporary assemblage between rider and machine sees caution abandoned. At this stage the motorcyclist feels irrepressible as he begins his pursuit of the edge. According to Lyng (1990), edgeworkers often recall how the activity brings about feelings of invincibility. Leon's narrative gives further weight to the importance of assemblage as a precursor to high-risk motorcycling practice.

It was the same story getting the first bike as the second bike ... I thought I knew how to drive it because I had the other bike for a year. But then I realised that with the power of the new bike it was a different story again. So this started a whole new learning curve, trying to be able to learn control ... It took months again to be able to drive the bike to its capabilities. [Leon]

This narrative account shows that the process of learning to master a bike, in order that assemblage fulfills its potential, is a gradual one. It must be afforded time and effort if it is to occur, and is necessitated each time a new bike enters the scene. Leon describes how

the practice becomes embodied, with behaviour underpinned by corporeal competencies as much as by cognitive ones (Warde 2005).

With the bike being able to do more so do you. Like ... as the power of the bike is increasing ... your level of skill has to increase with the increase in power. The skill is never going fast. There is no skill involved in pulling back the throttle. On a straight road someone who has never driven a bike could jump on a bike and do 180mph. But the skill is involved with actually being able to control the bike and know how the bike is going to react with what you do. What the bike does is essentially what you make it do ... I suppose it's like an extension of your body for all the world ... You have to be prepared to take your time and not just hop on a bike and be able to control it 'cause you think you can drive a bike. You have to respect the power of the bike and I suppose just give it time for your skills to increase and get used to the power of the bike. I dunno ... just like going around corners, when I got on a bike first maybe I could say go around a certain corner at 60km and then as time goes on your going around the same corner at 80km and then your going around the corner as fast as the bike will bring you around the corner. Then as you move onto the next bike say 100km was the fastest your last bike would bring you around the corner. Then you hop on the new bike and the bike has the capabilities of bringing you around the corner at 150km per hour. But essentially you don't have the skill to bring the bike around the corner at that speed. So I suppose you have to ... I dunno ... re-learn. You have to teach yourself to go faster and faster. [Leon]

Meanings

The meanings surrounding high-risk motorcycling see it connected to identity and a sense of self, particularly an impulsive self (Turner 1976). For Leon, this impulsive self is engaged in a constant search for the next adrenaline rush.

The [Honda] NS1 can go 120km per hour. The first time I was on the back of a bike doing 100km per hour I thought it felt like 100 mph. Then when I got my own bike and I was doing 120km on it, it felt unbelievably fast and there was adrenaline attached to it. But it wore off and 120km felt slow. Then when I got the new bike there was more power ... probably 2 or 3 times the old bike. The buzz was back again, going faster than I had gone before. Then it went from being able to go 120km to being able to go 120mph. That's since worn off and even though I haven't moved on yet I know the next bike I will get will go faster and it there will be adrenaline and after a while it will wear off. You're always left looking for the ... I dunno ... I suppose the next adrenaline rush ... It's like when I was younger jumping off rocks into the water. You jump off a small rock and there is adrenaline there and then you jump off the next one ... and you keep jumping off higher and

higher things looking for more adrenaline 'cause the adrenaline doesn't stay with the smaller things I suppose. It always has to be bigger and more dangerous. [Leon]

According to Natalier (2001) the impulsive self may also lead motorcyclists to reject expert systems which are more consistent with the institutional self. In our narratives we find that motorcyclists struggle with the dilemma between institutional and impulsive. Leon, for example, implicitly rejects the importance of driver training through his failure to complete a driving test. Yet, at the same time, he recognises the value of training to long-term survival.

So I bought another bike. 'Cause I still only had the provisional license, I bought another [Honda] CBR. It was another version of the same bike. It was the fastest bike I could drive. So I bought another one of those and I'm still driving it at the minute. I'm still too lazy to do my test. I did my test and failed it ... so I never actually put in the effort to go back and do it again. I will hopefully do it in the near future. I suppose its probably something that you should do, seeing as [bikes] are fairly dangerous. You should have training I suppose to keep yourself alive ... 'cause they are not the safest thing in the world. [Leon]

The primary source of knowledge for high-risk motorcyclists comes through personal experience. John recounts his personal history of life on bikes, explaining the importance of experience while, at the same time, suggesting that with each new bike comes a further period of learning.

I learned a lot of the important skills driving a scooter. I suppose the thing I found with driving a scooter is that it is a good base for learning ... I think the main thing is that I picked up the driver perception skills over the years going around on it. Its just those little things that are kind of hard to explain but make all the difference when your on two wheels ... I put the word around that I was looking for a bike, I got a call from someone that was selling a TDR 125. I did a bit of research on the bike. It was supposed to be one of the fastest 125s on the market. It was a two stroke engine which meant it was high powered but unreliable. It had a power valve that gave it an extra bit of power when you get up the revs. I liked the sound of it. I got the guy to call into my house ... I had the money ready ... I bought it there and then on the spot. I got some of the lads to show me the basics and then I just went up and down the road practising. I remember getting it up to about 60mph in the

estate ... I was just saying to myself that this would always be fast enough for me and I would never need another bike. I didn't really spend too long getting the hang of it before I went out for a spin with the lads. I suppose looking back on it I should have taken more time ... I wasn't really ready for the road. I mean I knew how the traffic worked and what I needed to look out for ... but I had to concentrate so much on making the bike go that I wasn't really able to concentrate on anything else. But I was just so mad to get out on the road that I just went for it. But I think that's what happens most young fellas ... they just want to get out too quick. You never really bothered taking the time you should. [John]

Informants also suggest that popular culture plays a significant role in forging perceptions of the biker lifestyle through its various representations. Rebellion, both violent and peaceful, has long been the mainstay of representations of the biker in popular culture (Austin *et al.* 2010). These representations offer prospective motorcyclists an insight into at least some aspects of biker culture. Similarly, the myths and stories shared among enthusiasts carry symbolic meaning. Motorcyclists and prospective motorcyclists draw on these sources as a guide in establishing identity positions (Laurendeau 2006).

Stories of dangerous escapades, that's kind of where I got the rebel link from with bikes. Like the stories were always cool, you know ... The stories were never boring. It was always doing kinda dangerous things. Whether it was a story about getting a chase from the cops or crashing, they were always dangerous. I think that's why I always associated bikes with being a rebel from a young age. There was something dangerous and exciting about it. Even then on TV and films, the guys on bikes wearing leather jackets always seemed to be cool fellas. They always did dangerous things. So I suppose I always had it in my head that when I got a bike I would live these things for myself. I suppose you try to make them things happen then when you actually do get one. [John]

Here, John is conscious of the cultural sources from which he has drawn. He acknowledges that this symbolism still plays an active role as he attempts to solidify his identity by creating an accompanying life narrative. In addition to representations of the biker in culture, interaction with other bikers serves as a major source of biker

knowledge. Leon describes how other bikers accompanied him on early rides and took the time to explain elements of the practice.

I remember going off for my first spin with a few of the lads and we all had the same power bikes. They had to stop and wait for me ... and I was wondering why 'cause my bike was a little bit faster than theirs ... When we stopped then they were telling me then that you had to drop into the bend ... That was the scary part ... The bike wasn't standing up straight anymore. You were getting closer to the ground and that was when you had to take the corners. That was one of the skills that was probably the hardest thing to do ... that was the scariest thing! I never really found it scary going fast in a straight line but when you are going around a bend fast it actually takes skill. [Leon]

Those engaged in high-risk motorcycling inevitably have accidents, and are routinely called upon to justify them (Laurendeau 2006). Leon's narrative typifies attempts by edgeworkers to shift attention away from their own ability to control a situation.

'Acting the mickey man' was just messing and doing things you weren't supposed to be doing. I would have been doing it on push bikes and BMXs before I was ever doing it on a motorbike ... It's showing off and acting the cool fella. Doing dangerous and stupid things to look cool and for the actual excitement ... My first crash happened when I was 'acting the mickey man' on someone else's bike. I was racing someone in a van and I had no helmet on. The van went in front of me and I was driving right behind ... and a dog ran out in front of the van and he slammed on the brakes. I didn't have much experience on the bike so I grabbed the front brake and automatically it locks the front wheel to either direction and throws you off the bike. I was thrown off the bike and the first thing to hit the ground was my head. I was 'acting the mickey man' and I didn't have a helmet on. It was the first time that I was ever injured on a bike. I tore up my arm and I had to make up stories 'cause I didn't want to tell my family that I was after crashing a bike. [Leon]

In relaying his narrative Leon describes how he has always been drawn to activities in which a level of personal risk exists. In his personal construction of reality, he views the representation of danger as a desirable element of the self. In this story Leon openly describes how, as an edgeworker, he has transcended many of the rules established to govern society (insurance/helmet/street racing). He points to his lack of experience as the

root cause of his inability to control the chaos he encountered on the edge. The dog becomes the factor that pushes him past the edge. He goes onto explain the physical harm caused by his inability to maintain control. It appears that Leon has justified this accident as a momentary lapse in concentration (Laurendeau 2006). Although fortunate that his injuries were not more severe, the remainder of his account sets the scene for future edgework. As his experience and capabilities improve, he advances the boundary line against which he is prepared to push himself. For others, relevant experience on the bike is a necessary precursor of edgework, and absence of the *right stuff* inevitably culminates in problems.

Born again bikers! I can even remember my own cousin. I went for a spin with him and he went to take me on straight away. He wasn't even insured like. It wasn't even a bend we came to on the main road and he couldn't take it. He went out across the white line. The car coming the other way had to swerve into the ditch to avoid him. You know ... 'cause he was on [bikes] years ago. I mean he was off [bikes] 10 or 15 years. When he came back then he still had the ego and he just wanted to flick it. He was driving a CBR 1000cc. He is able for it now again ... but at the time he wasn't close to it. He had to do a course to get the insurance down with Aon and I think that helped. In fairness, that made him more aware you know. When he was [riding before] there wouldn't have been as much traffic on the road. You have to know how to do your life savers ... if you're moving on a motorway its no good looking in your mirror. You have to look in the blind spot. [Eoin]

Here, Eoin explains that although his cousin had previous experience on motorcycles, it was in a different context, and his cousin simply didn't have the ability to push the edge; the result was a near-miss with a car on the motorway.

Conclusion

Oftentimes, in applying the lens of consumer culture theory there is a tendency to place too much emphasis on the symbolic elements of consumption. The turn to practice theory

affords us the opportunity to examine consumption phenomena in a more concrete and holistic fashion. While we have provided some insight here into the meanings associated with high-risk motorcycling, we have also shed light on the ‘doings’ of those engaged in the practice, and on the consumption objects utilised in these endeavours. The narratives offered by informants also uncover the internal rewards that can be achieved through such practice.

High-risk motorcycling practice is engaged in for its own sake. The twin requirements of speed and control enable motorcyclists to experience transcendence, escaping the drudgery of day-to-day existence as they live the moment. Interestingly, the informants’ narratives position control as something that ultimately occurs when rider and machine are being pushed to their respective limits. In contrast, danger is associated more clearly with taking things easy and, therefore, not having to concentrate fully.

This research illustrates that the practice of high-risk motorcycling also necessitates, and is fuelled by, particular consumption choices. Engaging in this type of edgework requires motorcyclists to use motorcycle that allows them to push themselves to the edge of their skills and comfort zone. Moreover, the design of the motorcycle further encourages this particular type of practice. Narrative accounts suggest that it takes time for riders to embody the levels of technique required to successfully take part in high-risk motorcycling. Once the embodiment of technique is successfully achieved, temporary assemblage of object (bike) and subject (motorcyclist) provides the foundation for the pursuit of edgework. As an edgeworker, the motorcyclist becomes expressive,

instantaneous and self-directed, allowing him to experience the internal reward of momentary transcendence from the mundane nature of day-to-day life.

The narratives provide further evidence that motorcycle consumption is embedded with symbolic, social and emotional values which cannot be accounted for by rational choice models. Conceiving of high-risk motorcycling as edgework connects it to notions of the impulsive self, liberation, speed and rebellion. Road safety programmes with a rational focus are likely to be largely ineffective because the rational self, the *I*, is transcended during edgework. Thus, future campaigns should appeal more to the expressive, instantaneous self that is present during edgework.

By employing the BNIM we have furthered our understanding of motorcycle subcultures and we have begun to understand their nuances. In doing so, the potential exists to make positive cultural change based on this insider perspective. This becomes possible when cultural factors are addressed at the driver training stage, when they are incorporated into advertising campaigns, and when they become the foundation for policy recommendation.

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