“FARKLE” or Die: Edgework, Risk Control, and Impression Management among BMW Motorcycle Riders

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This thesis titled

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ABSTRACT

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This research explores intersections of identity and voluntary risk taking, or edgework, among BMW motorcycle riders. Drawing upon interviews, participant observation, and analytic autoethnographic methods the practices of this subculture are presented. These findings are analyzed through sociological and social psychological understandings of situational identities and an appreciation of the personal and social dynamics to risk taking. This research presents the safety practices of the BMW motorcycle community labeled as “sport-tourers” and the processes they engage in to find an acceptable level of personal risk. Furthermore, findings from this work explain how riders encounter both positive and negative perceptions from others and the actions they engage in when facing potentially damaging impressions from others. This research helps to expand understandings of risk taking, presentational identity, and the universality of these themes.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My wrist twists down, the trees surrounding me blur, and the yellow hashes in front of me blend as I accelerate, coming upright again. I quickly grab the clutch and tick the toe up, throwing the bike into third as my BMW races towards the next corner. Earlier I had noticed the temperature shift as I climbed in elevation, but now all I think, hear, see, and feel is happening right here—right now. The engine subtly roars underneath the headphones playing my “twisties mix” but I don’t even hear the music. The corner is now upon me and I ease into second, braking to avoid snapping loose the rear wheel. I look through the apex, ease my rear and head over the centerline and rip the throttle again. A loud scrape punctures the silence. I’ve leaned a little too far, touching the foot peg to the hot pavement, but I can’t react, a change would disrupt my tenuous balance. So I hold my line, easing my weight from my right foot, smiling as I listen to metal grinding. This is me at the edge, I can’t go faster, can’t lean more, and am shaking knowing that more is to come.

Later that night, sitting around the campfire in the dying light of day, Charles notices my tires. We had just been visiting, having met each other earlier that day, and had been talking about bike maintenance. He shakes his head, and says, “see, like that, I wouldn’t let my tires ever get that low.” Admittedly, they were balder than they should have been and I had an appointment for later that week.

One year and a new set of tires later, I sat there nervously anticipating my demo ride on the new S1000RR, BMW’s newest, baddest, fastest, most technologically advanced motorcycle ever. Their first super class bike, designed to compete on the world stage with the best of the best race bikes ever made. And there I was, about to suit up and take it for a spin. A quick copy of the drivers license, proof of insurance, and within minutes I was going to be straddling 450 pounds powered by 193 horsepower. My steed pushes 90 HP at a weight of 622 pounds. Apples to oranges does barely apply, at least those are both fruits. While this demo is BMW sanctioned, dealers are supportive, and Frank had already more than given me the green light, I still felt anxious. Was I going to be good enough for the bike? Would something happen to the bike? I can’t afford 16K, let alone hurting myself. Did I have the right stuff? How does the staff really feel about this young kid taking out the new baby?

All these thoughts were causing a pit in my stomach when Nancy walked by, towards the shop with a digital camera and said, “Wow! That’s pretty impressive. I haven’t seen anything like that before.” I paused for a moment before I realized she was talking about my tires as I was originally here to get two new tires mounted. I walked with Karen into the back of the shop, where she, Will, and Frank all checked out my tires to differing degrees as she snapped a few shots. There was all kinds of talk of how evenly the wear was done, all the way to the edges with definitely no chicken strips, and really there was no tread
left at all. Karen even remarked that she had asked Frank if these tires had started as slicks (pure racing tires) or just looked that way now.

My confidence swiftly soared. Any doubts I had been feeling about my ability or the willingness they had to let me ride the new race bike quickly disappeared. I had immediately proven my worth with status markers like this—tires so evenly worn to near non-existence that they warranted pictures being taken by the staff of the shop. With my identity as a successful edgeworker cemented I could feel the respect and admiration of these fellow riders. Tires like these are not something one could easily fake. Only dedicated work with an orbital sander might come close. In that shop, and to those riders, I now no longer wonder if they think of me as a haphazard youth, tearing around the roads, bringing risk to others and myself. It is understood that wear like this only comes from good riding and being in control. Most riders come in with wear only down the middle, indicative of either long highway touring or fast riding while only upright and straight.

Risk within the community of BMW motorcycle riders is an allusive topic surrounded by ambivalence. BMW riders can be judged as too risky or be acclaimed for the same actions from other members within the community. Some claim to avoid risk at all costs while others seek out thrill in every corner. Riders engage in a myriad of practices, physical and mental, in order to successfully navigate the risks and to manage their situational identities within a community of fellow riders and with the larger society. These processes, of ambivalently managing risks in a risk-averse society (Lupton, 2002) that also rewards risk taking behavior (Donnelly, 2004) are not just unique to this community of motorcycle riders. Engaging in risk is a universal theme, as is the relation between taking risks and identity; since “when the chips are down…the self, in brief, can be voluntarily subjected to re-creation” (Goffman, 1967, p. 237).

In the following research I explore the intersections of risk taking and identity. These are broad issues and concerns of sociologists that are well connected to the specific community of BMW motorcycle riders that I am studying. I situate my investigation of these themes within the concept of edgework, a sociological and social psychological
approach to understanding personal voluntary risk taking (Lyng, 1990). Edgework theory has been previously used to study both the nature of risk taking (Ferrell, Milovanovic, & Lyng, 2001; Lupton & Tulloch, 2002) and furthermore, some scholars have specifically studied the intersections of identity and edgework (Anderson & Taylor, 2010; Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006; Holyfield & Jonas, 2003). The findings from this research build on this previously conducted research and further understandings of risky practices and identities. Before exploring the research findings that are the core of this research, the next chapter turns to a focused discussion of the germane extant literature.

In the following literature review I discuss previous research on edgework and identity. I highlight the previous edgework literature that focuses on understanding the experience of conducting risky behavior as well as techniques, benefits, sensations, and the search for control by those at the edge. Identity is a common theme of this research and these connections are made explicit. After outlining a symbolic interactionist understanding of a socially situated identity I specifically review the body of literature that combines this understanding with edgework. I discuss the varied interactional techniques used by edgeworkers to build an identity that benefits from engaging in risky behavior. However, edgeworkers may also face damaging impressions from others and I underscore practices of “impression management” (Goffman, 1959) and “aligning actions” (Anderson & Taylor, 2010) that edgeworkers utilize to distance themselves from problematic identities. I conclude this review of literature with a brief discussion of the limited amount of research focusing on motorcycling at the edge and make the argument
that the general research questions of edgework and identity within the community of BMW motorcyclists help to answer universal inquiries of risk and identity.

Following my review of literature is the methods chapter of this thesis, where I outline the process of collecting and analyzing the data used to understand this community of edgeworkers. This research benefited from triangulation (Denzin, 1989) and three main sources of data inform the findings of this study. I begin my discussion of methods with a thick description of the three research sites central to this project; a local dealership, a small regional motorcycle rally, and a national rally held by the owners association of BMW riders. I then discuss the in-depth qualitative interviews that make up a substantial portion of the data, paying special attention to describe my sample and my potential impact on the setting and subjects. Following, I outline my process of participant observation that draws upon my previous experience riding a BMW motorcycle. Given my intimacy with the subject matter and setting I further describe the use of analytic autoethnography that greatly enhances the critical and reflexive nature of this research. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the qualitative analysis conducted in the spirit of Glaser and Strauss (1969) that utilizes specific practices outlined by Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland (2006) and Charmaz (2006).

Following the above is the presentation of the first chapter of findings. This chapter, termed “Risk and Control,” focuses on the interplay between risk, identity, and strategies for maintaining control among BMW motorcycle riders. After introducing the importance of safety and feelings of control within the subculture of BMW sport-touring riders studied I introduce the two major areas of findings within risk, identity, and control. What emerged first and foremost from the data were the “everyday safety
practices of BMW motorcycle riders.” These techniques are largely objective, and speak to the things riders do in an effort to keep themselves safe. While presenting these edgework behaviors I highlight the elements related to the presentation of identity and search for control that help explain these practices. Riders strive for safety and control through a variety of techniques including: norm enforcement, wearing protective gear, simply owning and taking mechanical care of a BMW motorcycle, and through emphasizing skills and training, being conspicuous, accessorizing ones’ motorcycle, and being aware.

Following the presentation of these objective strategies is a discussion of the subjective interpretations of risk. It seemed that practices alone did not fully explain the issues within risk and control, and left out the process of riders making sense of the risk they engage in. In this section I argue that a balance between risk and control is necessary and describe the positive benefits riders experience when they are successful in maintaining this “edge.” However, riders either cross this edge or fear doing so and thus work to reclaim balance through a variety of neutralization techniques. I found that when facing personally unacceptable levels of risk riders blame the self for loss of control, deny the risk of riding a motorcycle, work to redefine the fears they face, normalize risks, accept risks, and make appeals to higher loyalties (Sykes and Matza, 1957). When riders are unable to reclaim balance it appears they often cease to ride. Concluding this first chapter of findings is a discussion that synthesizes the findings of this research with the broader body of edgework literature that broadens the general understandings of edgework and edgework behavior. Focusing on safety, a discourse of skill, awareness,
and redefining I compare and contrast the physical and mental practices of BMW riders with previously studied populations of edgeworkers.

The next chapter of findings, termed “Identity Issues,” turns the focus of edgework and identity to issues between BMW riders and broader society. In this chapter I discuss how BMW riders believe (or perceive) they are being seen by others and the negative and positive perceptions this brings. I found that sometimes, being seen as a motorcycle rider brings benefits to riders, as they draw upon iconic images of freedom, rebellion, and the appeal of the open road. Riders also receive social capital (Bourdieu, 1990) redeemable at the workplace and I discuss the ways in which riders work to present themselves in ways to receive these benefits. However, I also found being identified as a rider can be costly as riders worry that non-riders are imagining them as either the problematic “outlaw” rider or the extremely dangerous “squid.” In the face of these negative stereotypes riders were found to engage in individual and collective “aligning actions” to repair or redefine their potentially damaged identity (Anderson & Taylor, 2010). Riders were found to hide their riding-self, utilize disclaimers to either carve out a new subcultural niche or claim authenticity, and to engage in techniques of neutralization—defending the necessity of being a rider to their sense of self, condemning the condemners, and denying injury. I also describe the collective actions of the community that consist of aligning with popular social causes and dramaturgical stereotype busting (Anderson & Taylor, 2010). I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the broad implications these findings have for the general understanding of problematic identities and the practices individuals engage in when their sense of self is threatened. Concluding these findings is a summary and discussion of the overall
implications of this research. I also discuss the limitations of the research at hand and suggest a few directions for future research.

In general, I hope to accomplish several objectives with this research. First and foremost, I hope to extend Lyng’s (1990) original theory of edgework to a largely underexplored group of risk takers—motorcycle riders. Beyond Lyng’s tales of methodological danger there is little discussion of motorcycling as edgework and I hope to situate this “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 2002) within the annals of edgework topics. Second, I hope to expand the research specific to the community of BMW motorcyclists, as there is limited literature on this segment of the motorcycling world (Austin, 2008; Austin & Gagne, 2009). (All references to published work of Austin refer to D. Mark Austin, not the author of this thesis.) Third, in a combination of the first and second goals I hope that my study brings to life the specific practices of this group within the edgework framework and furthers general understandings of the mental and physical practices at the edge that are likely universal. Fourth, through an investigation of the problematic identity issues within the BMW community of edgeworkers I hope to shed light on the varied nature of stigma and the techniques of responding to negative perceptions. I argue that all groups suffer from general patterns related to in and out group distinctions and it behooves scholars to understand this trend in both highly stigmatized populations and among the “unblushing” (Goffman, 1963, p. 128). Fifth, I desire to present a strong case for the continued use of analytic autoethnography that makes research both evocative and analytic (Anderson, 2006). The story of riding at the edge has really yet to be told through a lens of sociological inquiry and I hope the following research does precisely that.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Faced with Mead’s “oversocialization” and Marx’s “alienation” our lives are increasingly pushed towards a structure in which we are dehumanized. Life full of ritualism, treadmills of consumption (Bell, 2009), and loss of community help to deny individuals the possibility of fully realizing a “united definition of the self” (Lyng, 1990, p. 870). Building from a synthesis of the works of Marx and Mead, Lyng reports “the predominant sensation for the individual is one of being pushed through daily life by unidentifiable forces that rob one of true individual choice” (p. 870). In the face of these forces, some individuals choose to respond and edgework is their answer.

Voluntary risk taking, which Lyng (1990) has termed “edgework,” is action that places individuals at the “edge” of “life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and environment versus a disordered self and environment” (p. 855). It is the sociological and social psychological approach to understanding voluntary high-risk leisure that dictates negotiating the boundary between chaos and order (Lyng, 1990). Edgework represents an important avenue of examination as it has been called the “key signifier of our age” (Lyng, 2005, p. 47). Lyng, in his seminal publication extends the explanations of Hunter S. Thompson (1971, 1979) and uses skydiving as the central activity to depict the nature and experience of edgework.

Lyng’s (1990) and other research specific to voluntary risk examines what Stebbins (2002) terms “serious leisure.” Serious leisure, as opposed to short-lived and mundane “casual” leisure involves steady participation in activity “that captivates its
participants with its complexity and many challenges” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 54).

Edgework has also been extended to studies of work (Simon, 2005; Smith, 2005) and in numerous explorations of criminal behavior (Ferrell, 2004; O’Malley & Mugford, 1994; Rodriguez, 2007). Motivations, benefits, issues of control, and phenomenological details of the edgework experience are common themes of the literature. One key concept, the construction and maintenance of identity, emerges across themes of motivations, benefits, the search for control, and the experience of voluntary risk taking. Drawing from social psychological and symbolic interactionism literature we see a rich history of examining processes of identity. Central components to the situational self are the presentational and dramaturgical aspects to identity (Goffman, 1955, 1959).

This review of literature will provide a detailed look at previous research on edgework, highlighting the experience, techniques, search for control, and benefits especially those in regard to identity. Following, a case for a socially situated and symbolic self will be made and the groundwork for a symbolic interactionist approach to identity will be laid. Bringing those themes together will be a section committed to the theoretical overlaps between edgework and identity. Edgeworkers both play up and work to distance themselves from the identity of being a risk taker as well as strive to bring others’ judgments of them into alignment with their sense of self. Implications of the intersections between edgework and identity concludes this review of literature and will be followed by a presentation of results specific to edgework behavior and identity processes among BMW motorcycle riders.
Edgework

Edgework theory is a sociological explanation of voluntary individual risk taking that attempts to explain behavior “in terms of a socially constituted self in a historically specific social environment” (Lyng, 1990, p. 852). This viewpoint represents a response to what Lyng refers to as the “personality predisposition” and “intrinsic motivation” models of risk takers that fail to incorporate both psychological factors and broader contextual understandings. Risk taking can be approached from the individual and examined in terms of “stress-seekers” (Klausner, 1968), “sensation-seekers” (Zucherman, Kolin, Price, & Zoob, 1964), and “eudaemnists” (Bernard, 1968). Rather, for Lyng the practice of edgework is directed by the “macro level, influences resulting from societal and cultural complexities, media enculturation, and technological change” and “internal variables such as predispositions, goals, and psychological states, and, to a large extent, interpersonal influence” (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993, p. 2).

Two contradictory sociological perspectives of edgework have developed since the formulation of the theory. On one hand, edgework can be seen as “a radical form of escape from the institutional routines of contemporary life” (Lyng, 2005, p. 5). Lyng relies on synthesis of Mead’s “oversocialization” and Marx’s “alienation” in the creation of the theory. Here the need to distance oneself from alienating and increasingly rational social institutions is seen as the impetus for engaging in risk. Edgework provides individuals the outlet for skill development and feelings of control when faced with constraints, habituated life, and loss of control in their everyday life (Kiewa, 2002). Alternatively, there is a call for “embracing risk” (Baker & Simon, 2002) as edgework is seen as “an especially pure expression of the central institutional and cultural imperatives
of the emerging social order” (Lyng, 2005, p. 5). In this emerging social order risk is typically portrayed as negative and attempts are made to minimize institutionalized risk. This is Beck’s (1992) “risk society,” a postmodern world where risks are shifted from organizations to individuals (Baker & Simon, 2002) and in the past 200 years there has been an increasing demand for the skills of edgework in life beyond leisure (Lyng, 2005). Risks have become global, increased in nature, and “are therefore more difficult than in past eras to calculate and therefore manage or avoid” (Lupton, 1999, p. 4). The ability to successfully navigate risk is not seen as an escape in this light, but as a success defined by institutional demands, since “Edgework is increasingly what institutions expect of people” (Lyng, 2005, p. 8). For Lyng this “edgework paradox” represents the complexity of the theory and its importance in explaining social life (1990, p. 883).

Skydiving often appears in edgework literature (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Laurendeau, 2004, 2006; Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006; Lipscombe, 1999) and other research utilizing edgework theory depicts a variety of outdoor leisure activities such as adventure racing (Schneider, Butryn, Furst, & Masucci (2007), surfing (Stranger, 1999), climbing (Kiewa, 2002; Simon, 2005), BASE jumping (Allman, Mittelstaedt, Martin, & Goldenberg, 2009; Ferrell, Milovanovic, & Lyng, 2001), bike messaging (Fincham, 2006; Kidder, 2006), motorcycling (Lyng, 1998), ropes courses (Holyfield & Fine, 1997), scuba diving (Hunt, 1995), and white water boating (Jonas, 1999; Holyfield & Jonas, 2003; Holyfield, 1999). However, edgework has also been used to explain stock trading (Smith, 2005), the legal profession (Simon, 2005), and has been used in numerous explorations of criminal behavior (Ferrell, 1997, 2004; O’Malley & Mugford, 1994; Rodriguez, 2007).
Edgework entails a “clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of an ordered existence” (Lyng, 1990, p. 857). Death, or at least serious injury, is often what awaits the edgeworker’s failure to meet the challenge. However, Lyng contends that work on the “boundary line” reaches wider than issues of life or death. Edgeworkers more generally explore the “boundary between order and disorder, form and formlessness” pushing both the limits of the body and technology (p. 858). Edgework is often depicted as a circle, where ideas of safety, security, and stability are “inside,” while insecurity and instability are “outside,” delineated by the “edge.” To flirt with these boundaries is to take risks. Research on edgework often examines the experience of being on the edge itself, motivations, the processes of redefining individual feelings about risk, skills necessary for successful edgework and maintenance of control, among a variety of social issues.

*Sensations*

Sensations of conducting edgework are a frequently examined aspect of the experience. Lyng found that individuals from a wide variety of edgework activities all described their experience as producing “self-realization,” “self-actualization,” or “self-determination” and that via acting instinctively they were left with a “purified and magnified sense of self” (1990, p. 860). Emotions of fear during the anticipatory phases typically give way to feelings of exhilaration and omnipotence. Edgeworkers also report changes in consciousness, becoming highly focused, losing sense of time, and feelings of “oneness” with objects or the environment. “Hyperreality” is also experienced; that the experience feels more real than normal life while the experience is also described as being indescribable (p. 861). Many risk-takers claim the ineffability of edgework and that
language cannot capture the “essence of edgework” (Lyng, 1990, p. 861). Others claim that only those who do can understand (Ferrell, Milovanovic, Lyng, 2001, p. 178).

Edgework scholars argue that risk-taking depends on emotionally motivated commitments (Parker & Stanworth, 2005) and that risk taking is “fundamentally associated with emotions” such as vivid awareness, being swept away, a sense of oneness, and community (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002). Schneider et al. (2007), coded five categories of accounts given by elite adventure racers and found that sensations were influential in their risk experiences. Prior to risk taking most athletes felt nausea, nervousness, or horror, which then typically gave way to a sense of calm or relaxation. The aesthetics of risk in surfing involve sensations such as thrill, sensuality, feelings of oneness, loss of self, intense awareness, and the “ecstatic experience and cathartic release that can be achieved” (Stranger, 1999, p. 273). The mediated nature of “Bridge Day,” a large base jumping festival, was found to be central to reflection and BASE jumpers’ recreations of “the sensual, the emotional, and the visceral” (Ferrell et al., 2001, p. 195). Durkheim’s ritual, “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality” has been used to understand edgework among messenger-bike racers (Kidder, 2006, p. 349). Further research on BASE jumpers has found strong motivational connections between sensations of escaping from stress, feeling an adrenaline rush, freedom, and transcendence of time (Allman et al., 2009).

Flaherty (1999) explores the subjectivity of time that others have reported as the sense of either speeding up or slowing down as a part of edgework (Kidder, 2006). “Protracted duration”—the perception of time passing slowly, “is experienced when the density of conscious information processing is high” and “temporal compression”—the
quick passage of time, “is experienced when the density of conscious information processing is low” (Flaherty, 1999, pp. 112-113). Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) theory of flow is used to support studies in the subjectivity of time (see Flaherty, 1990) and also is found in descriptions of the feelings of edgework. Lyng states that “edgeworkers not only are oblivious to extraneous environmental factors, but they lose their ability to gauge the passage of time in the usual fashion” (1990, p. 861). Flow is often described via its indicators; balance between challenge and skill, merging of action and awareness, clarity of goals, unambiguousness of feedback, concentration on the task at hand, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, transformation of time, and the auto-telic experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The dimensions of flow seem to quite accurately describe the sensations of edgework, a similarity Lyng recognizes while also stating that the parameters of the two experiences are “fundamentally different” due to flow’s “enjoyable middle regions” and edgework’s self-determination and self-actualization versus flow’s loss of consciousness (Lyng, 1990, p. 863). Individuals engaged in edgework also typically report intense feelings of connectedness, especially in the case of motorcyclists, where connection can be accomplished through “smoothness, fluidity, and coordination” (Lyng, 1998, p. 240).

**Skill**

Skill, especially that which allows for control, makes up another important aspect of edgework. Lyng describes, “edgeworkers regard the opportunity for the development and use of skills as the most valuable aspect of the experience” and claim to possess a special ability. This special aptitude is the “ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos, a situation most would regard as entirely uncontrollable”
This “mental toughness” is seen as an essential cognitive ability, often described as an innate skill. Lois (2005) suggests that skill, seen through discipline and the ability to keep emotion in control, is a necessary skill for search and rescue edgeworkers. When people are hurt or killed during edgework the ideas of innate ability are often brought forth, rather than acknowledging that some risks are beyond control (Laurendeau, 2006; Lyng, 1990, pp. 859-890). An elitist attitude can often accompany edgework following the sense that one owns personal skills over others. Lyng suggests that this attitude often leads individuals into pursuits of other forms of edgework, as he discovered for himself that the seductive edge of skydiving gave way to engaging in high speed motorcycle riding (1998).

Laurendeau (2006) explores Lyng’s suggestion that this control is “illusory” and discusses skydiver’s methods for constructing and maintaining the sense that they are in control of their edgework. This research, finding that skydivers support claims of control by blaming the victim and making appeals to fate in the case of loss, builds upon previous work on what Celsi et al. call the “illusion of control” (1993, p. 16). Edgeworkers have been further found to perceive the ability to control planned and unplanned events, leave themselves a margin of safety by performing at a level below their utmost skills, and show control through careful preparation and planning. Yet edgeworkers still freely state that the smallest error could result in supreme loss. Gear also emerges as an important aspect for maintaining the illusion of control (Bellaby & Lawrenson, 2001; Karinch, 2000; Schneider et al., 2007), and this is a topic I will explore further in this research.
Influence over the body is an important aspect of control (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002) as is control over the emotions (Lois, 2001, 2003, 2005). The practice of redefining risky experiences and the feelings of risk and control edgeworkers feel is also a central component of voluntary risk taking. This can be seen as Margolis’ (1998) “exchanger self”—“self-interested, rational” and striving “for emotional control” over one’s engagement with risk (p. 8). Lois (2005) describes edgework as having four phases; 1) preparation, 2) performance, where the sensations discussed above are felt, 3) the “aftermath stage” in which edgeworkers feel “omnipotent and self-actualized” and 4) “redefining feelings.” Examining the emotion management of search and rescue volunteers Lois found that they face challenges stemming from unsuccessful missions. These edgeworkers rely on the “redefining stage” where tactics such as denying responsibility for the victim’s fate (Sykes & Matza, 1957), blaming the victim, focusing on the positive side of the negative experience, and attributing loss to a higher power all work to maintain the illusion of control. In order to maximize their ability to conduct future edgework techniques “were aimed at cognitively changing the meaning of what happened, which transformed their feelings about it” (Lois, 2005, p. 143). Celsi et al. (1993) further explored how risk and notions of control are acculturated and attributions are made regarding incidences when edgework crosses the line. Death is accepted as a part of life, attributed to human error, and different accounts are given to members inside and outside of the risk-taking community. When skydivers are successful in near-death experiences they see this as proof of their skill, but blame others when they cross over the line too far (Laurendeau, 2006). Illusions of motorcycle control and the subsequent
erasing of risk also relies on gear as “practical measures of self-protection” and the rejection of “other expert knowledge” such as following speed limits (Natalier, 2001, pp. 71-72). Exploring how motorcycle riders interpret, or maintain ambivalence to risk, Natalier further found that riders interpret accidents as evidence of poor riding technique, lack of planning, awareness, individual ability, fate, luck, or circumstance and not as illustrative of the inherent risk.

Notions of control in edgework research expand beyond the self and aspects of social control are embedded within risk-taking. Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) explore how the edgework of skydiving and snowboarding allows creating personal space, finding that individual control manifests itself as both reproductive and resistant agency against norms of male hegemonic control. Social control was also found to be influential in enabling or constraining edgeworkers’ ability to engage in risk taking from members internal and external to the skydiving community (Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006). Externally, government regulatory bodies and “others,” family and close friends, constrain edgework, but Laurendeau and Van Brunschot found influence from members inside the activity was the most pervasive. Other skydivers explicitly voice concerns, control knowledge via mentoring, provide sanctions, and actions outside the realm of group-accepted behavior are redefined as reckless illustrating the socially constructed nature of “the edge” (Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006). Ideas of control are further supported by Kiewa’s (2002) study of the internal regulations placed on climbers by fellow climbers that turn “edgework as resistance” into another form of oppression again speaking to control’s place in edgework.
Motivation

Scholars further attempt to determine why edgeworkers engage in voluntary risk taking and motivation for engaging in edgework is another area of research. Goffman posits that in the absence of spectators or pay, “it is presumably easy to assume that self-determination is involved and that the chances incurred are brought on solely because of the challenge that results” (1967, p. 196). Snow and Lyng (1986) discuss three different “vocabularies of motive” found among skydivers’ motivations; hedonistic, counterculture, and the edgework orientation. The attraction to hedonistic values and sensations, epitomized in the “Eat-Fuck-Skydive” way life was found to be most pervasive (p. 166). Blurring ideas of hedonism and counterculture, the use of drugs and other intoxicating substances to help bring pleasure were also found to motivate edgeworker’s behavior. Lastly, their engaging in risks were motivated by edgework and ideas of an “anarchist” experience with the potential for death or injury unless mitigated by control over the situation (Snow & Lyng, 1986, p. 169). Akin to flow, Maslow’s nineteen characteristics of the peak experience give voice to and are used to examine individual’s motivation for continued participation in skydiving (Lipscombe, 1999). Many of the aspects to a peak-experience reflect sensations, emotions, and control while the “unique being of the individual” and “fusion of the individual” hint at the importance of identity within edgework motivations (1999, p. 270). Other motivations for engaging in edgework have been found to include: acquiring a new skill, feelings of elite skill, a sense of accomplishment, adrenaline rush, control, overcoming fear, sense of belonging, and personal- feelings of ‘realization of their capabilities’ (Allman et al., 2009, p. 240).
Major themes within edgework research have been discussed above, and include; sensations, skill especially that which relates to control, the process of redefining risk, and motivations for participation. Sensations vary between intense focus and awareness, or a loss of consciousness and a blurring of spatial and temporal recognition. Edgeworkers claim to posses special skills, often centered on maintaining control of the edge and relating to the safety required to enjoy the edge. Edgeworkers often engage in “retrospective interpretation” (Kitsuse, 1962) where after engaging in risky behavior, they neutralize negative feelings of risk, which left untended, could impede future performances (Lois, 2005). Varied positive aspects of the experience are often cited as motivating reasons to engage in edgework and one of the most re-occurring was that relating to identity. Edgeworkers describe personal feelings of self-actualization and accomplishment and also receive group benefits from others engaged in similar activities. Donnelly (2004) argues that edgeworkers may engage in risk taking “perhaps because of their psychological makeup or genetic programming, but also because they value the comradeship available because of such behavior” (pp. 52-53). These ideas of comradeship, and finding of the self, point towards a crucial aspect of edgework—the creation and sustenance of identity.

The Self and Identity

Edgework can play a crucial role in identity as it has been found that taming fear can have identity rewards (Arnould, Price, & Otnes, 1999; Donnelly, 2004; Holyfield, 1999; Holyfield & Fine, 1997; Holyfield & Jonas, 2003; Jonas, 1999; Jonas, Stewart, & Larkin, 2003; Katz, 1972; Simon, 2005). Before the specifics of how risk taking facilitates a sense of identity, the groundwork for the sociological and symbolic
interactionist approach to the self and identity must first be explained. The link between self and identities can be found in the work of James (1890) and his ideas of there being as many selves as there are different social positions that one holds. Wiley (1994) describes that identities are “nested within and express the qualities of the selves and collections of selves” (p. 1). More generally, it is accepted that the self is the sum total of a person’s conceptions of themselves while identities are parts of the whole (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).

Cooley discusses identity using the term “looking glass self,” explaining that our sense of self comes from the imagination of appearance to others, the imagination of their judgment, some sort of self feeling and as a result a self-concept, or identity (Cooley, 1964; Shaffer, 2005). The development of self-identity is also theorized as containing two stages: awareness of personal attitudes and other individuals of our attitudes, and then incorporating those with the attitudes of larger social groups (Mead, 1934; Shaffer, 2005). Mead’s theory, posited in Mind, Self, and Society (1967) and numerous other publications lays the groundwork for this understanding and the aligning recognition of the importance of language—the ability to symbol. Mead saw the “self as a process and not as a structure” (Blumer, 1966, p. 535; Mead, 1967) and central to the ability to take on the role of the “generalized other” in conceiving of ourselves. His work also emphasizes the place of reflexivity, socialization, the negotiation of social life, and symbolic interactions, interpreting and conveying ideas to others. As the meanings of language and interactions are never static and are predicated on agreed upon meanings, social life and the interactions that make up our identities require a constant negotiation of situated meanings.
This view is encapsulated by the symbolic interactionism approach that “orients to the principle that individuals respond to the meanings they construct as they interact with one another” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 32). In this perspective the self is an “agent that serves as the reflexive beacon of social interaction, not existing separate from, or otherwise transcending, social life” (p. 32). Blumer (1969) discusses his views on symbolic interaction and the construction of the self in three premises. These are; “that human beings act toward things on the basic of the meanings that the things have for them,” that “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, social interaction that one has with one’s fellows,” and that “meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he [sic] encounters” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2).

The idea of an interpretive process is expanded by Goffman’s (1959) specific groundwork for the theoretical applications for the understanding of identity and social life as dramaturgy. Goffman focuses on social life as a performance where actors attempt to control the impressions they “give” and “give off” and subsequently “control of the conduct of others, especially their responsive treatment of him [sic]” (1959, pp. 2-3). The self, and thus an identity is a “performed character…not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented” (pp. 252-253). Like a character in a play, the roles we take on provide scripts, help to determine our interactions, and become powerful suggestive components to our myriad of identities. With these roles come all sorts of fascinating components; props, costumes, jargon, identity kits, the front stage—behavior that we want seen (p. 107) versus the backstage—
behavior that would disrupt the performance (p. 112), role distance—distancing our self from the image of the role and role-embracement—taking the role as a direct reflection of self (Goffman, 1961b, pp. 97-100). Others refer to self-presentation as “the attempt to present who we are, or who we want people to believe we are, through our words, nonverbal behaviors, and actions” (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2002, p. 166).

Furthering the symbolic interactionism tradition is the concept of identity work, the “range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348). Identity work can be utilized to either embrace or distance oneself from a role, as in the case when implied identities are incongruent with desired identities or are stigmatized. Identity work involves manipulations involving particular settings, physical appearance, verbal construction and assertion, and selective association with individuals and groups (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Identity work can be discussed with Goffman’s secondary adjustment—“ways in which the individual stands apart from the role and the self that were taken for granted for him by the institution” (1961a, p. 189) and impression management (see Goffman, 1959, pp. 208-237). Impression management has been defined as “the conscious or unconscious orchestration of a carefully designed presentation of self so as to create a certain impression that fits our goals or needs in a social interaction” (Aronson et al., 2002, p. 166). Another form of impression management of situational identities is labeled “aligning actions” (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976) which refers to actions taken to “facilitate a working consensus” of positive views of the self and in the eyes of others (Anderson & Taylor, 2010).
There is a strong precedent for examining symbolic interactionist notions of identity within leisure settings. Goffman’s ideas of a personal front, or style, such as helmet use and clothing are important aspects of identity work within a bicycle messenger community (Kidder, 2005), as is manipulating the physical setting and props among raft guides and climbers (Arnould, Price, & Otnes, 1999; Donnelly, 1994; Holyfield, Jonas, & Zajicek, 2005), maintaining cosmetic or personal appearance (Cahill, 1989), selective association and verbal assertion among climbers and rugby players (Donnelly & Young, 1988), and aligning actions among gun collectors and skydivers (Anderson & Taylor, 2010). The following section further explores the connections between edgework and identity.

Edgework and Identity

Stebbins’ (2002) concept of serious leisure and its distinguishing qualities point to the role edgework holds in regard to identity. He identifies the need to persevere in the face of danger, leisure’s complicated roles (and thus identities), and illuminates benefits such as a renewal of self or enhancement of image, identification in an unique ethos or social world, and the strong identification with chosen pursuits among those who engage in serious leisure, or edgework (2002, p. 7-8). As Goffman states, “it is during moments of action that the individual has the risk and opportunity of displaying to himself and others his style of conduct when the chips are down…the self, in brief, can be voluntarily subjected to re-creation” (1967, p. 237). Kjolsrod (2003), in her study of specialized play and adventure found metaphorical systems to be highly involved and useful in the “construction of identity and attainment of individuality” (p. 460) and that daring situations offer opportunities to demonstrate valued behavior. Concepts of an intrinsic
ability, “placing trust in one’s flair” is a way of tackling risk (Kjolsrod, 2003, p. 467) and the importance of telling narratives in creating identity is discussed. Narratives “lie at the heart of self construction” and analysis that “centers on storytellers engaged in the work on constructing identities and on the circumstances of narration” allows for a rich contextualizing of a social self (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 104). Celsi et al. (1993) state that beyond allowing one to be different from their everyday peers “sustained participation in a high-risk subculture offers the opportunity to construct a ‘new’ personal identity” (p. 11) and that as one completes their acculturation they evolve a stable high-risk identity (p. 19). Adventure therapy workers, through the use of ropes course based edgework, group interaction, and emotion management cues attempt to change peoples identities and sense of self (Holyfield & Fine, 1997).

Edgework does not ipso facto create identity and there is a rather small but descriptively powerful body of literature that explores the presentational strategies for what I term “edgentity,” or the identity of an edgeworker. Mitchell (1983) found that presenting oneself as a climber requires careful presentation of skill in real climbing situations and negotiations of the “development of symbolic representations of ability and accomplishments” (p. 83). Mitchell also discusses the use of souvenirs such as photos, old equipment, rock collections, stickers, and clothing as sign pieces of climber’s front stages that are used in the creation of an identity as a climber. These items are Mead’s “generalized other”—“any object or set of objects, whether animate or inanimate, human or animal, or merely physical—towards which he [sic] acts, or to which he [sic] responds, socially” (1967, p. 154). Fashion “plays a more conspicuous role in modern times” (Simmel, 1957, p. 546) and there are often many fashion requirements among
edgeworkers. Equipment serves both a functional purpose and is an important aspect to the presentation of self. Climber’s clothing showing signs of wear carry increased sign-potency and it was found that “climbers sometimes take steps to increase the apparent ‘experience’ of their gear and thus its symbolic value” but that this must be done covertly (p. 123). Imploring Goffman’s term of “impression management,” avoiding disruptions of a presentation (1959, p. 208), this expressive equipment “can serve as an account against negative performance [if] one’s identity is supported by appropriately experienced gear” (1983, p. 127).

Kidder (2005) extends the importance of gear among other aspects of style including riding behavior, helmet use, bicycle choice, clothing, and language with his work on meaning and identity among bicycle messengers. Kidder paints the picture of the messengers work as edgework, evoking Turner’s (1964) concept of liminality to describe their physical and cultural edge. The components of style and the link between action and meaning all present valued riders, those capable of taking risks and handling fear (p. 355). Kidder (2006) extends this line of research refocusing on the importance of sacred symbols used to contrast “real” bikers from “posers” and uncovers the distinctions in the subtleties of the style and gear between these two groups. Two key areas were found; rituals that give public attention to risky behavior allowing stable identities to be formed and the role bikes have as symbols in the creation and sustenance of bike serious messenger subculture. Protective clothing among motorcyclists has also been found as an important boundary marker between serious riders and those labeled as posers (Austin, 2009).
Donnelly (1994) explores climbing, focusing on “the circumstances under which trust becomes an issue, the process by which it is tested, and the manner in which it is employed to ensure the integrity” of identity (p. 215). The “front” is discussed in the creation of trust, and examples of setting, appearance, manner, and actions are given that may impact one’s “willingness to accept the actor’s claim, to trust the actor” (pp. 227-28). In earlier work, Donnelly and Young (1988) uncover deliberate acts of identity construction among climbers and rugby players. Modeling, the deliberate adoption of mannerisms, attitudes, and styles of dress, speech, and behavior, or the “front,” is seen as a major technique of novices employed in order to gain access to an identity group. Often these acts are based on outsider’s stereotypes on the subculture and not actual identities, resulting in a shallow identity by distancing non-members and occasionally becoming ostracized from current members. Donnelly and Young (1988) further discuss how subcultures frame and hide discussions of risk, stating, “much of the work as instructors, now available to many climbers, would disappear if insider conversations about risk reached a wider audience” (Donnelly and Young, 1988, p. 238).

Interestingly, and illustrative of the ambivalent nature of risk—hiding risk is what Donnelly and Young (1988) identify as important for climbing instructors while constructing danger was found crucial in the identity creation for river guides (Jonas, 1999). Describing what Goffman (1967) calls an “eventful experience,” Jonas’ research identifies five presentation and framing techniques of raft guides to incorporate danger into the social experience of river trips. This allows for the creation of an identity for the edge-working guide, which she refers to as “river gods or goddesses” for “if the river is not perceived as dangerous, then the passengers need not rely on the river guides’
expertise to get them through. The river guide role becomes less important” (Jonas, 1999, p. 254). Guides utilize expressive control in story telling, pre-rapid preparations, safety talks, scouting, and wild rides to highlight the identity confirming aspects of danger on the river. Guides’ presentational strategies were also found an important factor in the marketing of a “magical” experience on the river (Arnould, Price, and Otnes, 1999).

These various acts contain functional purposes in many cases, but researchers contend that these presentations are often beyond what is purely necessary (Jonas, 1999; Jonas et al., 2003). In these acts we see successful dramatic realization, that is, presentation in which “the individual infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure” (Goffman, 1959, p. 30). Guides discuss professional secrets, that big water is in fact rather safe and involve passengers in pre-rapid preparations rituals that do not serve a functional purpose other than increasing anxiety. Safety talks help participants “feel anxious which, in turn, intensifies their perception of potential danger” (Jonas, 1999, p. 257). This also allows guides to demand obedience and subservience. Scouting, on-shore examination of a rapid’s dangers also involves misrepresentation, as “most guides, however, take the extra time to scout, which both prolongs and intensifies the experience for them and the passengers. In fact, scouting oftentimes seems to be performed specifically for the benefit of the passengers” (p. 259). Wild rides—incorporating hitting rocks, getting splashed, and missing planned routes are theoretically bad routes, and symbolize poor technical skills, but are often carefully created to play up possible risk and match expectations of clients. Too “clean” of a run, and guides face audience
disappointment and the loss of some identity and the respect they command when they are successful in creating danger.

Jonas et al. (2003) continue research regarding outdoor edgework activities and presentational identity, helping to enforce Goffman’s emphasis on the reaction of the audience as necessary for identity confirmation. Their research finds that others are important in creating a sense of an “adventurer identity” stating, “just ‘being there’ is not enough for imputing adventurer identities; such identities are also dependant on the actions of the river runner and the ratification by an audience” (p. 424). This research finds that even though individuals are on a wilderness experience where solitude and escape are stated goals, encounters with others, while disruptive are actually necessary for the confirmation of an adventurous identity.

While having the identity of an edgeworker often means identity and social rewards like becoming a “river goddess,” being an edgeworker can also be a problematic identity. Goffman describes three types of stigma, physical deformities, blemishes of character, and tribal stigmas, and that on these assignments of stigma we “exercise varieties of discrimination” that effect life chances (1963, p. 4). Engaging in edgework likely calls forth stigmatization of the second variety as the labels of thrill seeker, crazy, and adrenaline junkie speak to weaknesses of the self. Risk is a “curiously ambivalent” topic, even among risk takers, as society both admires risks and “at the same time we may be horrified by it” (Donnelly, 2004, p. 30). As many edgeworkers define the experience through positive sensations, a focus on safety, skill, and control they likely work in ways to align their notions of themselves with the presentation of self they “give off.”

There is limited work on the promising application of “aligning actions” among
edgeworkers to mitigate perceptions of public misunderstanding (Anderson & Taylor, 2010). It was found that skydivers and gun collectors utilize individualized and collective management strategies to distance themselves from public distrust and negative media characterizations. When the subject could not be avoided edgeworkers utilized disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975) like “I’m not a freak” and techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957) including “denial of injury,” and “appealing to higher loyalties” (Anderson & Taylor, 2010). Collective practices were also uncovered; “dramaturgical stereotype busting” a dramatized public performance to counter negative stereotypes and “affiliation with popular social causes” in an attempt to build public perceptions of the sport as aligned with positive cultural values (p. 52). Body builders also engage in such identity work to counter the “malign view that all body builders…are narcissistic, inadequate and socially irresponsible drug ‘abusers’” since these potentially incorrect public perceptions are “threatening to self-identity” (Monaghan, 2001, p. 2). Facing serious injury that was both damaging to the body and perceptions of self as runner, Hockey (2005) and Collinson (2003) constructed their athletic identities by creating routines, continuing the use of runner’s uniforms as identity kits, building the self as runner through narrative, and through differential association. Stigmatization and claims of misunderstanding point to issues of social interactions in broader society and the importance of contextual understandings of edgework related identities.

Conclusion

The intersections of edgework and identity practices paint pictures of the experiential potential of “negotiating the boundary between chaos and order” (Lyng, 1990, p. 855). As research has shown, identity is not necessarily an a priori result of risk-
taking. Edgeworkers are actors in a social world and must dynamically work to frame their risk taking as positive, manage details of their presentation, and make sense of their actions to themselves and others. Edgework’s attention to both the internal and external aspects of risk make it a strong lens for the examination of our identity that is tied to both the self and others. However, edgework is a relatively young theoretical concept at not yet twenty years old. While there is a seemingly substantial body of literature that explores a wide range of edgework experiences and applications there are limitations in the field directly stemming from an overall paucity of research.

This research seeks to bring a deeper understanding of edgework and identity through contextualizing narratives and experiences of BMW motorcycle riders’ edgework. I was particularly interested in the processes of managing identity that likely emerges in significant part through engaging in, controlling, and presenting the voluntary risks of riding a motorcycle. Further, BMW motorcycles represent a unique component of the larger motorcycling world with the subculture’s strong emphasis on safety. Austin (2009) and Austin & Gagne (2008) have conducted interesting research that appears to be the only work to focus specifically on the BMW community. Their work is highly illustrative of community behaviors, rituals, and values of the mobile identity-based community. While Lyng’s edgework is referenced in regard to what helps to hold the community together, and part of what makes certain cultural uniforms of protective equipment so relevant, little explicit research has been done exploring experiences at the edge for BMW motorcycle riders. This study seeks to highlight that behavior and answers Donnelly’s critique of the failure of “response theories” to take into account the actual experiences of risk taking in sport (2004, p. 52). Also, the group studied in this research
is typically older than edgeworkers previously studied, with a mean U.S. age of 50 in 2009 (Winkel, 2010), and addresses concerns over a lack of edgework research among an older population (Donnelly, 2004, p. 43).

While Lyng (1998) discusses both skydiving and motorcycle riding in his methodological confession of research at the edge, motorcycling represents a surprisingly underexplored topic in edgework literature. Most research into motorcycle riders has focused on the criminal aspect of outlaw biker gangs including the “1 percent” (see Finlay & Matthews, 1996). There is limited work that examines motorcycle culture (Eyerman & Lofgren, 1995; Halnon & Chen, 2006; Packer & Coffey, 2004; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Watson, 1992) and most work regarding motorcycling risks relies on statistics to document accidents or hospital records (Auman, Kufera, Ballesteros, Smialek, & Dischinger, 2002; Teoh, 2010). There is limited work on how riders reconcile or negotiate risks (Bellaby & Lawrenson, 2001; Natalier, 2001) and the research reported in this study greatly furthers those conversations.

This review of literature highlights edgework, the creation and maintenance of a socially situated identity, and processes of identity with the pursuit of voluntary risk taking. Within the edgework literature there is a strong focus on safety and skill, especially that which results in feelings of control, awareness leading to strong positive emotions, and redefining of the negative aspects of risk taking. There are often renegotiations throughout edgework and identity—as “the tension between risk and safety is continually being negotiated” (Donnelly, 2004, p. 54) and one’s sense of the self is never static.
Research Questions

As a phenomenological study, grounded in the experiences of the group and the emergent data, I did not enter the field with pre-conceived research hypotheses or predictions. However, as a full member of the BMW riding community for nearly three years, and a peripheral member for many previous years I have numerous experiences and encounters that suggest rich interesting data on risk practices and their relation to identity. Armed with a cursory knowledge of the literature review above I endeavored to let the implications of data emerge within a loose framework of the relevant literature. What follows are those findings, supplemented with discussions of theoretical connections when applicable, that expand the literature on edgework and socially constructed identities.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

“Any group of persons—prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients—develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it”
Goffman Asylums (1961, p. ix)

As previously stated, I entered the field with loose questions regarding edgework practices and processes of identity among BMW motorcycle riders. Data was gathered to answer these questions using a variety of established methods. Each was designed to highlight different aspects of the sub-culture. All in an attempt to “get close,” themes of risk and identity were investigated through in-depth interviews, participant-observation, and analytic autoethnographic reflection. The findings from this research are strengthened with a degree of triangulation through the utilization of these varied techniques (Denzin, 1989).

Research Sites

Access to participants was garnered at three different sites; a local dealership, a small regional motorcycle rally, and a large rally organized and conducted by the National BMW Motorcycle Owner’s Association (MOA). I became a regular customer and visitor to what some refer to as the “clubhouse” during the fall and summer of 2009 after gaining permission from the owner and staff of the dealership. There are a mix of visitors to the dealership; in my time there more acquaintances would stop by and “shoot the shit” than did shoppers come to browse and spend. The dealership is small and more modestly run than some BMW Motorrad dealerships where riders feel they need to be in a three-piece suit to be taken seriously. The shop has a small-town feel, cement floors, and a very casual atmosphere. I was somewhat adopted by the staff there, and became a
familiar face and name. All employees were aware, at some level, of my research involvement. A number of the employees, including the head of sales, Frank, would often tell me about customers’ backgrounds, introduce me to others, and would suggest good subjects to approach for interviews. Five riders who were met here were interviewed as part of this data set, or through a snowballing technique stemming from the dealership.

The second site for data collection was a small, rural, BMW motorcycle camping rally. These events are numerous in the BMW community, and in a given year there are dozens of these advertised in the MOA publications. This camping-based event ran Friday evening to Sunday morning and was held in the corner of a fairly large private campground in the mid-west. A $35 entrance fee covered camping fees and got “rally-goers” a pin, access to the “forever pot of coffee,” two dinners, a hot breakfast Saturday, and a continental breakfast Sunday. Events like these often do not feature more than a loosely organized ride or two during the day on Saturday and many riders elect to find their own adventure, as placement for these events usually centers on a combination of good roads and/or unique cultural sights. Riders engaged in a mix of riding and socializing, and most appeared to know others at the event. For some this network of ties emerges through repeat visitation at this yearly event and others like it, or through pre-existing friendships. Other riders there are solo, looking to meet people, be social, or just take in the sights. See Austin (2009) for a detailed description of a standard BMW rally and rituals. This particular site was selected for its proximity, small size, and date availability. I, along with my father who was not a member of the research team, attended this same rally in 2008 and 2009. The 2008 visit was a preliminary scouting trip, and served as the initial stages of making analytic sense of the community (Charmaz, 2006, p.
11) before specific questions or IRB approval was in place. In 2009 the event served as the first moment of official investigation and two interviews were gathered here. The time spent at this site was informative and illustrative of the challenges of the play/research workload balance. I faced balancing my primary source of relaxation and enjoyable “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 2002) as a secondary consideration to requirements of interviews, observations, and recording field notes. This challenge persisted throughout the entire research project.

The third formal site of data collection was at the BMW MOA National Rally held in Johnston City, TN from July 14th-19th, 2009. This event featured nearly 9,000 registered guests and 6,780 motorcycles, 87% of them being BMWs as stated at the closing ceremony. My time there during the first two days was at “Camp Gears” a young rider program designed to introduce riders under the age of 25 to each other, the National Rally, and values, techniques, and tips from the BMW volunteer organizers and the community at large. The remainder of the weekend was spent conducting interviews, and participating in the events of the rally. The rally featured a variety of activities/displays, ranging from massive exhibitor and retail displays from almost every possible aspect of accessories to a spread of BMW bikes ranging from antiques to the pre-release S1000RR superbike. A dirt track was constructed near the middle of the event for riders to test and BMW to showcase the GS series of dirt-oriented bikes. Two BMW semis of demo bikes were on constant display and bikes were at a continuous stream as excited riders got the opportunity to take test rides. The event further featured nightly live music, a “beer tent,” food, rows of porta-showers, and rows upon rows of tents. Social interactions ranged from large gatherings of people milling around or attending educational seminars to two
close friends catching up in front of their respective tents. Field notes revealed that
public behavior can be broken down into the categories of shopping, visiting, attending a
“bike show,” attending seminars, and riding. Previous research has been conducted to
uncover the rituals of rallies and this work provides wonderfully rich detail on both small
and large BMW rallies (see Austin, 2009).

Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews constitute a bulk of the data. Utilizing a form
of “active interviewing” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 123), I asked riders to describe
and reflect upon their riding history, style, and experiences with two general areas of
investigation; risk and identity. I entered the field with a loosely constructed and broad
interview guide consisting of open-ended questions that was employed to help structure
the interviews. However, riders were free, and encouraged, to discuss topics tangentially
and what resulted often resembled a “guided conversation” (Lofland et al., 2006, p. 105).
All subjects at a minimum addressed all of the questions on the guide, while nearly all of
the riders shared above and beyond the interview guide. In an attempt to fully benefit
from grounded theory methods of interviewing, subsequent interviews delved deeper into
the emergent themes as they appeared in the growing data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 29). As an
intensive interview technique I highlighted my own insider status as a fellow rider to
validate participant’s perspectives and actions while stressing the need for critical
reflection on aspects of riding that are taken for granted (p. 28). Many subjects, interested
in the study and findings would ask me what I was discovering as interviews concluded.
This led to fruitful conversations that resembled member checks (2006, pp. 111-112) and
I gained great insight through participant’s reflections on the analytic issues I was uncovering in the data.

Riders were asked about their riskiest moments on the road, which often resulted in a detailed discussion of the risks of riding. Further prompts explored how riders “feel about the risk,” what they do to help minimize the risks, and if they thought the risk was controllable. Riders were also asked about images and perceptions of motorcyclists; of themselves, other motorcyclists, and the imagined perceptions that non-riders have of them. Riders were also asked about times they either downplayed or highlighted the role of riding in various social interactions. The interviews also consisted of asking riders what they think it means to be a BMW motorcycle rider, which shed great light on the cultural ethos of the community. This information is central to understanding the population and it also has great meaning for the themes of risk, control, and identity.

Sample

Interviews with 11 riders were conducted during the spring, summer, and fall of 2009. Eight males and three females were interviewed individually, except for one interview that was conducted with a male novice and female novice together. Three riders were under 25 years of age, and these were relatively novice riders with limited experience. The rest of the riders were adults ranging in age of 40 to 60, with a range of experience from a few years of riding to over 900,000 miles on a BMW. All were BMW riders at the time, although many had owned various bikes in their past. All interview participants were white. The average length of these interviews was just over one hour with a maximum interview length of just over two hours. All of these interviews were
recorded and transcribed and the combined interviews constitute 10.5 hours of recording and 124 pages of single spaced text.

These interviews were collected in the three previously discussed sites and participants were drawn using a blend of sampling techniques. I engaged in convenience, opportunistic, and stratified purposeful sampling by attempting to capture major variations within age, experience, gender, and riding type while also making decisions that took advantage of new opportunities and ease of access (Patton, 2001). I also recruited a few participants through a snowball sampling technique as riders suggested friends or acquaintances they thought suitable for participation. I seldom approached riders cold, at the onset of meeting. At rallies it is common to share a table for meals and most of the participants and I spent minor time in casual conversation before I approached them with formal requests for participation. On some level, I was gauging potential participants on their reflexivity and thoughtfulness and was thus also engaging in intensity sampling by seeking out “information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely” (Patton, p. 234). Only one rider declined the request to participate and I found spending time with potential subjects firsthand to be most fruitful for both gaining consent and fulfilling sampling criteria.

Given that over the course of the data collection period I had potential access to thousands of people, the choices of whom to approach was oftentimes difficult. I purposefully sampled to include women, and 3 women out of 11 informants might represent a slight over-sampling when compared to the overall population of riders I observed over the course of my time in the field. I purposefully sampled to include younger riders as well, and attended a three-night event designed for young riders as a
way to get access to this limited population of BMW riders. This research does not attempt to generalize findings to all BMW motorcyclists, but instead illuminates processes of risk management and the active processes of identity construction within a rather specific subset of the recreation community. Within the BMW community of motorcycle there emerge a number of sub-categories, in some ways defined via the type of motorcycle ridden although this is not a definitive sorting category. BMW Motorrad identifies their bikes in categories of “high performance,” “urban,” “tour,” “enduro,” and “sport.” According to this criteria, I mainly spoke with a sub-set of riders from the “tour” category, although this only accounts for bike models in current production. Culturally sub-contextual, this research centers on the “tour” or “sport-touring” group of riders—riders who do short or long trips on mainly paved roads, and largely ignores dirt/off-ride riders and track riders. Among these different environments the risks and overall nature of riding differs greatly and it seemed prudent to focus the lens of analysis. While findings from this project are specific in that regard, it is highly likely that the findings are applicable in numerous sporting subcultures and in the world at large.

“Sport touring” is a culturally significant category that was used by many of the interview subjects to describe themselves and their style of riding. Riders describe their riding style mainly using “sport touring” or “touring,” but also with examples of being a “commuter” interested in the “utilitarian” aspects of riding, loving “longer rides where I can do multiple days…and camp,” but also being interested in “fun spirited, local, quick fixes” riding on “secondary and tertiary roads.” A number of riders mentioned riding solo as part of their riding style, or at most, in limited groups with known riders. Previous research on BMW motorcyclists describes findings of collective identity, master statues,
and long distance riding as boundary markers within “a non-geographic, mobile, identity-based community of touring motorcyclists” (Austin & Gagne, 2008, p. 417). There of course exists a spectrum in the “sport touring” category between touring- long distance rides that are often destination based and sport riding that is typically faster, shorter, and closer to home riding. Riders in this sample represent both sides of the spectrum, from Mary, who has close to 900,000 life-time miles mostly gathered in the form of long distance, cross-country trips to James who put 8,000 miles on his bike last year riding on the local back roads and in his words, “not gone anywhere.” While riders in my sample largely defined themselves as “sport touring” riders there is no reason to assume this is a different category than the “touring” BMW motorcyclists studied by Austin & Gagne (2008) and Austin (2009).

It is important to further disclose that I interviewed my father as part of the sample. I grew up in a riding household and was influenced in countless ways by his riding and his ushering me into the sport. It is crucial for me to include his voice formally in the research since my lens as a researcher is undeniably shaped by our experiences and feelings towards riding. By including him in the sample I was able to include his thoughts as part of my formal analysis and worked to compare and contrast his views with the other riders I spoke with. I was relieved to find his take on riding to be largely aligned with the other riders in my sample and greatly increased my confidence in generalizing at least to sport touring BMW motorcyclists. The following table describes key characteristics of interview subjects (Table 1).
### Table 1

**Primary Interview Subjects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Sport riding</th>
<th>Commuting</th>
<th>Touring</th>
<th>Length (minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glenn</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50’s</td>
<td>Small camping rally</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40’s</td>
<td>Local dealership</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60’s</td>
<td>Local dealership</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40’s</td>
<td>Local-through dealership</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40’s</td>
<td>Small camping rally</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50’s</td>
<td>MOA National Rally</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20’s</td>
<td>Local dealership</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20’s</td>
<td>MOA National Rally- Camp Gears</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>60 (joint)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20’s</td>
<td>MOA National Rally- Camp Gears</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>60 (joint)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40’s</td>
<td>Local-through dealership</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50’s</td>
<td>MOA National Rally</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While I asked riders to pretend I did not ride in order to encourage rich descriptions, in reality, participants treated me as one of their own. My bike was always within 500 yards for every interview conducted, if not within 20 feet. I was often dressed in riding pants and boots, part of the “totems” to subcultural membership (Austin, 2009, p. 82). Furthermore, interviews were conducted at a dealership where I was considered
somewhat part of the insider crew—familiar with the owners and staff—or on the road, with my tent, dirty bike, and out-of-state plates helping to ensure being regarded as a fully participating member—or with local riders, familiar with my history and status as a commuter. I was even mistaken for staff at the dealership. Mileage is a key cultural status marker (Austin, 2009, p. 82), a symbol un-fakable in the world of potential posers. When participants found out, through asking, that in the two years since owning my bike I had ridden nearly 18,000 miles, my methodological stance as a complete member researcher was rather solidified. In many ways I benefited from this insider position and was able to relate my own experiences as a technique to draw out further participant-generated insight.

While my insider status was largely beneficial, at times it required that I take an especially active role in the interviews. Asking riders to retrospectively discuss how other people in their lives feel about riding, if they ever have felt the need to change how they discuss riding with others, and the sensations of riding relied a great deal on their ability to critically reflect. While most of my interview subjects were selected in part because of their perceived capacity for insight, this is a lofty request. The differences between openness, self-awareness, and articulateness are vast and I found great variability in my informants. Many risk-takers claim the ineffability of edgework, that only those who do can understand (Ferrell et al., 2001, p. 178), and that language cannot capture the “essence of edgework” (Lyng, 1990, p. 861). Riders were often unable to deeply discuss times they ever felt negative pressure from others because they ride and relied on the words “you know” to describe the experience of being at the edge. In response I turned an analytic eye to what those struggles for words signify and pushed for riders to
elaborate or specify by asking them to further describe (Charmaz, 2002) sensations and emotions “like I’ve never ridden before.” At times riders showed a lack of articulateness regarding times they conduct impression management of their riding-self. This likely occurs more often than they are aware of because the patterns of presenting themselves to others as in control of the risk and of the road passes them unforeseen.

Riders do make claims of control to various audiences and the data collected in this research contains hints of these discussions; riders make claims of safety, ownership of the experience, and use verbiage of control. Because I was seen as an ally, someone who has had the rear wheel slide a few inches in a corner, or as someone who has let a scream ring in their helmet because that truck just about took me off the road, I was privy to an insider perspective on how riders deal with risk. This familiarity was certainly an asset (Denzin, 1989; Laurendeau, 2006; Mitchell, 1993) as I was likely receiving more of a more authentic understanding of the backstage view. However, other approaches to collecting data on risk, risk perception, and impression management might reveal interesting differences. It is suspected that if an outsider, a non-rider, conducted interviews the presentation of risk would be less nuanced, less diverse, and more focused on managing impressions of riders as safe and in control like the disclaimers of skydivers and gun collectors studied by Anderson and Taylor (2010). Lyng’s (1990) struggle in data collection even suggests that riders might have been hesitant to discuss their experiences with a non-rider. Some might argue that a neutral stance is best, that I’ve gone native, too accepting, and too blind to my own use of jargon, internal processes, and regular riding since the stance of a “complete member researcher” often hides more than it reveals (Adler & Adler, 1987). Furthermore, some might claim that “formal
conversations among high risk sport participants may be full of references to safety and control” whereas “informal and private conversations, gossip and stories are often full of references... when circumstances have been extremely unsafe and evidently out of control” (Donnelly, 2004, p. 44).

Countering this point follows two arguments. First, even to a seemingly neutral non-member, riders are likely to engage in management of their edgeworker impressions. Every audience gets a presentation, even within gossip or stories, and as a fellow rider I may be seeing a more risky or safer version of someone’s “true” nature. Critical awareness of this process is not guaranteed with outsider status alone nor does “long term contact” implicitly equal a greater ability to interpret data. Secondly, I argue that I was situated perfectly in the community and was able to use my status in a variety of ways to receive intimately rich data and rather immediate entrée—a blessing to many qualitative researchers. As a relatively newer rider, clearly the junior to many of my tribal elders (Austin, 2009), riders may have been taking me “under their wing,” excited to share with an emerging, and somewhat rare, young fellow member. As my UPS man even says, “It’s kinda rare to see a college kid on a BMW.” In these interviews I was able to present myself as a “knowledgeable newcomer,” a research role suitable for addition to the typology proposed by Snow, Benford, and Anderson (1986). This role benefits from insider knowledge; I was seen as experienced enough to know the basics and be included in conversations perhaps not heard by outsiders. However, as a still relative newcomer I easily positioned myself as naturally curious, skeptical, and in need of more knowledge as I grappled with questions and observations. Since I was likely seen as having much left to learn, but with a good start already accomplished it is possible that these riders
presented a “more acceptable notion of the self” or ideas more in-line with the cultural ethos of the group. To the newer riders I spoke with I was also able to present myself as a “buddy researcher” (Snow et al., 1986, pp. 384-385) although I propose the term “curious peer” is more applicable since my role was more intrinsically tied to the setting and participants than was their research with the homeless. Here, I was likely seen as more similar and novice riders felt free to explore various topics with an ally going through the same processes of gaining community membership and skill development. Some have criticized studies of alternative and extreme sports for only focusing on authentic participation and core members (Donnelly, 2006) or youth participation (Donnelly, 2004). In this research I interview experts and novices alike across a range of ages in an attempt to counter this criticism and to offer a more complete snapshot of the BMW sport touring world. Members on both sides of the experience spectrum were able to both reveal subcultural knowledge/values/norms that are deeply entrenched, and possibly unnoticed, as well as critically reflect on aspects of the group. In this vein, all of the interview subjects presented a fairly clear picture of what makes BMW’s unique and varied positions on the nature of risk and identity. Lastly, the use of analytic autoethnography discussed below, counters if not neutralizes claims of having gone native.

Participant Observation

As previously mentioned, data for this study was also collected through participant observation. I investigated this subculture as a complete member research, fully engaging in activities and shared experiences common to the community (Adler & Adler, 1987). This study entirely took advantage of my role as an “opportunistic
researcher” as I am an active rider (Reimer, 1977). I had been riding a BMW motorcycle for two years prior to investigation, grew up in a BMW motorcycle household and commuted to work nearly everyday whilst conducting and writing up this research. The idea to investigate themes of risk and identity within this population in fact emerged while at the first, and primarily personal visit, to the small local motorcycle rally described above after struggling to gain entrée in a few other subcultural groups. Adler and Adler (1991) argue research in your “yard” gives researchers the “best opportunity to get close to their subjects” (p. 23) and as discussed previously I experienced benefits due to my insider status. My involvement with riding literally began in my backyard and it is argued that living this closely with the subject matter is the only way “researchers meaningful penetrate subjects’ worlds” (p. 23). Similar to research conducted by insiders Austin and Gagne (2008) on BMW motorcyclists I experienced no noticeable changes on the part of other riders once they learned of my research other than their willingness to participate and curiosity about my research and findings (p. 424).

As a complete member researcher I participated in various activities common to the BMW community: countless personal rides, commuting to work, visiting the local dealership, listening to and participating in conversations, reading motorcycle magazines and websites, and observing other riders. These activities led to selective yet rich ethnographic field notes of critical observations, conversations, and reflections. These were especially targeted at first describing the scenes and settings common to the community and secondly as they related to themes of identity and risk. Field notes and interviews were conducted concurrently and primarily at the three sites discussed above—the small rally, the national rally, and the local dealership. Not all the time I
spent in the field or engaging in community behaviors was spent as a full researcher since I maintained my active role as a consumer of this leisure activity while also collecting data and engaging in analysis. However, I approximate that I spent 120 days commuting, 20 days full-time on the touring road, and 50 hours visiting at the dealership during the three seasons of collection that make up observational data. Insights gained in one avenue of data collection supported continued efforts in either future participant observation or interviews. Field notes, jottings, reflections, and memo writing was done in accordance to many of the suggestions outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). These compiled to account for 23 pages of single spaced text that does not include countless recordings and brief notes that were made in the field and during analysis.

Analytic Autoethnography

There is much research into the worlds of leisure and sporting subcultures that utilize qualitative methods to allow for nuanced and detailed discoveries (Austin, 2009; Holyfield & Jonas, 2003; Dimmock, 2008; Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006; Wheaton, 2000). However, while much of this research seems to draw upon writers’ insider status to inform research questions, gain insider access, and inform interviews, scholars then suffer from a “crisis in representation” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) as they write them selves out of their research once past the methods section (Anderson, 2006). The current research builds on the rich tradition of qualitative research but further offers a more complete look into the subculture of BMW riders through the use of analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006).

By this I mean that I draw from my status as a complete member researcher, maintain a commitment to an analytic and reflexive research agenda focused on
improving theoretical understanding of a broader social phenomena, engage with informants, and lastly, keep myself visible in the texts of my research. I also strove to be reflexive on my impact to the setting and subjects (Anderson, 2006, p. 378). In this research I attempt to make quite transparent my analytic insights through recounting my own experiences, openly discussing challenges, changes in beliefs, and thus “vividly revealing [myself as a person] grappling with issues relevant to membership and participation in [a] fluid rather than [a] static social world” (p. 384). Exploring very personal questions of identity and risk taking processes as an insider member of this group, but to avoid including my own thoughts, reflections, and experiences as I struggle to make sense of data and my own lived experiences with the topics at hand would seem an utter misrepresentation. Furthermore, I treated myself as a subject of my own interview guide, and throughout the coding process bracketed my thoughts, feelings, experiences and insights as part of the larger collection of data (Emerson et al., 1995). Personal memo writing became quite frequent as I progressed in data analysis, and time following personal rides was often spent attempting to connect my feelings and emotions with the dialogue of my participants. In keeping with features of an analytic autoethnography, my experiences supplemented that of my informants, and throughout analysis I made a crucial commitment to avoid self-absorption. These techniques of capturing and including the self do much to counter claims of researcher bias and over-identification.

Further, what makes this project well suited for the use of analytic autoethnography is the exclusive non-spectator aspect of motorcycle riding especially “sport touring.” There are no bleachers, no side courts, no drop-zones. It is an ephemeral
leisure activity, almost ultimately portable and exclusive to the self. While riders may mingle following participation in settings like dealerships, coffee shops, and rallies, the action has largely already taken place. Like much of the previous work investigating the backstage of edgework, this study asks questions of the ineffable. It seems irresponsible to rely purely on the words of participants and more traditional ethnographic observation, without allowing my previous, current, and future experiences to help make sense of the data. In many ways, the findings represent countless hours of introspective and retrospective sense making. This certainly stands true for any good ethnographer; immersed in the field it becomes impossible to remove yourself. In reality, the self is the lens through which our subjects’ stories are conveyed. I, we, are inherently tied to our subjects and the worlds’ activities we study. The scholars who write with no mention of themselves are ignoring the “primary analytic agents” of qualitative research (Lofland et al., 2006, p. 196).

Recognition of the importance of my involvement and impact upon the research setting came to me as I discussed listening to music with noise-cancelling earphones under my helmet with my girlfriend:

She flatly said, “I don’t like that, it seems too dangerous.” She is aware of the thesis work I am participating in, occasionally discussed research directions, but is a non-rider and has yet to be a passenger. I immediately flipped into “safe” impression management mode- very confident, outlining the cons and pros of riding with music, clearly emphasizing the pro side of the debate that is one contested in the larger riding community. In my defense, attempting to prove my innocence on the charges of “edgeworker” and an irresponsible risk taker I stacked the evidence, “I visually scan the road, am so aware of my surroundings, I am still a better operator than most everyone on the road…” To a suspecting outsider or someone I am worried about judging me on the risks of riding, my account of riding with earphones results in a very strong claim of control, safety, and dominion over my experience. Whether or not this is the case is beside the point. (Fieldnotes)
It are these types of reflexive thoughts and critical insights that do much to bring deep analysis to the world potentially “taken-for-granted” and help inform this research. This specific memo, written while still immersed in field work and transcribing interviews, not only informs my methods chapter, but is directly relevant to the themes that later emerged from data. By exposing myself, allowing my presence to be felt, understood, and linked to theory it is my hope, and Anderson’s (2006), to blur and transcend traditional academic discourses between the evocative versus analytic and the personal versus sociological. This language, the voice of the researcher/participant-self should not be limited to the boilerplate methods section. By sharing and exploring the often messy and confusing process of my research it is my hope that I 1) do more to bring this story to life, and 2) make the findings more valid. Overall, and at a minimum, this research has helped me understand my self, my dealings with risk, and personal questions of identity. However, as with any good research, I likely opened more avenues of inquiry as opposed to providing concrete answers.

Analysis

In an effort to limit my on-going reflexivity during the time of intense coding of interviews and field notes I largely withdrew from the field. This disengagement also stemmed from theoretical saturation, my calendar of research deadlines, and the heavy winter in the Midwest 2009-2010 (Snow, 1980). Not being engaged with my participants for weekly Sunday breakfasts or talking at the shop with regulars helped me focus on the work at hand since there is no finite "end" of potentially interesting and insightful data. However, my closure continues to be impacted by a form of role conflict, albeit in a
different form than Snow suggests, as I am still attempting to maintain relationships and my own riding based roles, while discontinuing my data collection role (Snow, p. 107).

Since I entered the field with two rough areas of investigation and loosely constructed interview guides this research does not conform to the strict adherence of grounded theory. However, data was analyzed in the tradition of Glaser and Strauss’ (1969) grounded theory approach, and the analytic procedure consisted of constant comparison. Further, purposive sampling was conducted as data was concurrently collected, coded, and analyzed for local concepts initially—risk and identity, and subsequent research narrowed in upon emergent themes (p. 45). Accordingly, empirical and theoretical observations emerged inductively, from the ground up (Snow et al., 2006).

After reaching a point of theoretical saturation, all of the typed data—interviews, field notes, analytic self-reflections, and jottings were compiled and were coded in a rough line-by-line style. In the printed margins I worked to fully explain the processes, meanings, actions, feelings, and consequences at hand. While on some level I was “looking” for topics related to risk and identity I remained open to the story of the data and challenged taken for granted understandings. These codes were then compiled into a separate document, where they were sorted and reduced into more inclusive categories. These codes were then brought back to the entire data, and a second stage of focused coding was conducted. Here I began to synthesize and explain larger sections of data, and to lump these similar ideas into separate analytic files (Lofland et al., 2006). Following, axial coding was conducted to link the dense networks of relationships between codes to
the emergent main categories of findings (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout this process I wrote memos as connections became visible and understandable in the data. These memos proved invaluable in making sense of data and laid the groundwork for the following discussion of results.

In this chapter I discuss the methodological approach to the study of BMW motorcyclists, the risks they take, the quest for control, and implications for identity. Findings from this study are strengthened via triangulation of semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analytic autoethnography. These data inform and enrich each other in a grounded approach of analysis that depicts the rich experiences and processes of BMW motorcycle riders. The results of this study are presented in the two proceeding chapters. Chapter Four discusses risk, riders’ strategies for successfully navigating the edge, and their efforts to interpret and make sense of their edgework. Chapter Five focuses on stigma management of riders as they engage in identity work to distance themselves from two incorrect, yet pervasive motorcycle-based stereotypes while also trying to carve out specific space, physical and identity centered.
CHAPTER 4: RISK AND CONTROL

Introduction

The interplay between risk, identity, and strategies for maintaining control will be seen throughout this paper and is the key finding of this research. Just as one strives to manage the impression they “give” and “give off” (Goffman, 1959), so they seek to manage their risk. As others have studied, and is presented above in the review of literature, there exists a link between risk and identity. Riders gain deeper group membership and entrench identity rewards through presentations of their willingness to engage in, and the successful completion of voluntary risky behavior. Austin and Gagne (2008) deeply explore the nature of collective membership and community membership within the BMW community but with only slight mention of the relationship of risk and individual’s edgework. As I will show, community is not only built for this group through factors of adventure touring, proficient, highly skilled riding, and safety. This research finds that it is the identity of a successful edgeworker, individual’s risk taking behavior and status that both grants individuals their unique identities, but also helps influence the cohesiveness of the community at large. As Lyng (1998) discusses, a common system of “symbolic ‘logic’ and trust in others ability to act appropriately” while engaging in edgework “helped to main the solidarity of the group” of motorcyclists he studied (p. 240). By controlling, navigating risk, and then sharing this with others, riders carve out individual identities within the larger community. This management, searching and striving for control (Lupton, 2002), is a central motif of life in modern society and certainly for edgeworkers (Laurendeau, 2006; Lyng, 1990; Natalier, 2001).
One of the clearest messages to emerge from the data was safety. While participants discuss both risks and safety related to motorcycle riding, their narratives place significantly more emphasis on safety. Most riders had to be specifically prompted to describe and catalogue the risks they engage in while the stories, values, and techniques related to safety more clearly and freely emerged. Riders outline the risks of the road as including; loss of awareness, visibility, road conditions and specifically corners, other drivers, deer, speeding tickets, equipment failures, and riding without gear. It is interesting to note that never did riders discuss actually crashing as they described the risks they face, as this is the ultimate consequence of facing the dangers listed above.

Learning to ride, I was often told “You go where you look,” both with your eyes, and your mind. To look at the guardrail and imagine your body crumpled around it is poor riding strategy, and also not much fun.

So much of the risks described by riders are as Lyng (2001) would call, “uncontrollable” and others have investigated control in risk taking behavior (Hunt, 1995; Laurendeau, 2006; Lois, 2005; Lyng, 2005) Throughout analysis, and even during interviews, it became quite clear that the story of “seeking control” was the central component linking the data and was woven through nearly all the accounts shared. Riders seem to work to control the risks they face and their techniques of safety in very conscious and active ways. In this way, much of riders’ opinions of risk could be seen as ambivalent (Natalier, 2001) as riders both embraced the pursuit of risk but through a dialogue of avoidance and control. Riders more often emphasized the positive aspects of safety, typically through aspects of the experience that are controllable rather than the non-controllable risks of other drivers, deer, and the road. A rider can be in control of
safety in many more ways than they can be in control of the risk, even though they might often be the same thing. This subtle framing of the issue and the fact that riders had so much more to say about safety speaks volumes to the process of sense making riders engage in about their risky leisure. In many ways they are seeking to define their risks as “normal”—“necessary, appropriate, reasonable, or understandable” and coinciding with subcultural views of acceptable risk (Hunt, 1995, p. 441).

Highly ritualized yet central elements to rider’s quest for safety and control are discussed below. These are all objective strategies; things riders wear and do and include themes of cultural norm enforcement, wearing protecting riding gear, owning a BMW, mechanical upkeep, training/education, being conspicuous, accessorizing the bike, and paying attention. Throughout these themes, special attention is paid to highlight the bifurcated yet intertwined nature of control and identity embedded within riders’ search for safety in their edgework experience. Issues within “paying attention” illustrate the complexities of voluntary risk taking and lead to a discussion of the subjective aspects of redefining risk (Lois, 2005); things riders feel, think, and say related to “making sense” of the risk they partake in. Here, the struggle for control is paramount as riders’ selves are threatened, and in the very realest of ways.

Everyday Objective Safety Practices of BMW Motorcycle Riders

A cultural ethos of safety was one of the key elements of safety that riders discussed (Austin & Gagne, 2008, p. 431). Being safe is a key focus for BMW riders, and appeared in all of the rider’s descriptions of what it means to be a BMW motorcycle rider. In terms of both attitudes and dress, BMW riders assume, and help enforce a standard of safety they believe to be above the rest of the motorcycling community. Kyle
describes BMW motorcyclists as minimizing risk by “looking at it in a more intelligent way” and through having a more realistic view of the risks of motorcycling. John describes BMW motorcyclists as being “more in tune with the risks” and Lisa posits that BMW riders are “very safety conscious, probably a lot more so than any other brand-specific rider.” When Mary thinks of BMW riders she often assumes that “they’re focused on safety, they’re focused on performance, they’re focused on doing their best.”

*Norm Enforcement*

Regarding attitude, one of the aspects to the cultural norm of safety is community norm enforcement of behaviors akin to the “policing of the edge” found among skydivers (Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006). Riders describe this as “peer pressure” and Mary appreciates belonging to a group whose “mindset around you is really keyed into [safety].” While this norm encompasses many aspects of community member’s behavior, the most prominent is what riders wear. BMW riders also appear to “know” what a BMW rider looks like, or should. A cultural mantra in the group is “All The Gear All The Time,” or ATGATT. This phrase is known to most motorcyclists but appears particularly common to BMW riders. Glenn describes this as “we wear helmets, wear jackets, wear pants, wear boots, wear gloves; we wear protective gear.” This is described by Austin’s (2009) research on the ritual uniform of BMW riders. Mike, a newer rider, discusses this uniform and showcases its importance through his strong claim that “you’re not going to see anyone in a ratty t-shirt and shorts and sneakers cruising down the highway on a Beemer.” In fact, numerous riders refer to the image of the rider in shorts, flip-flops, with no helmet as the quintessential anti-BMW, and anti-safe image. Mary echoes this sentiment, and exclaims “I don’t know that I could be a guy at this rally that didn’t wear
his helmet” and other informants suggested that in order to really explore the group pressure to conform to a norm of safety that I show up at a rally on a “rat Harley bike” in a leather jacket and observe the negative social messages received. Mark specifically has experience with this normative pressure when he will occasionally ride without a jacket in the heat of the summer. He reports that “I’ll pull into a rest stop and there will be other BMW bikers and they’ll look at you ‘like what’s the hell’s the matter with you?’”

In this way, “wearing the gear” serves two important purposes for BMW motorcyclists. As Austin (2009) states, “the clothing of this group serves both functional and symbolic purposes” (p. 85). Besides wearing protective gear as a key strategy utilized by riders in their efforts to conduct edgework safely, ATGATT represents a key to ritualistic (Austin, 2009) group membership and serves as a central identifier, or “symbolic marker between adventure touring riders and those who were members of other communities” (Austin & Gagne, 2008, p. 437). Gear is an oft discussed aspect of the edgework experience, and often serves multiple purposes; participation, safety (Schneider et al., 2007), cultural membership (Kidder, 2006; Wheaton, 2000), and identity creation (Crane & Bovone, 2006, p. 232). While I entered the field expecting to find “the gear” as an important aspect, the full realization of the importance of the multiple purposes came to me during one of the few times I was not wearing “the gear.”

The following reflection comes from field notes written during a weekend rally in PA.

I started the bike to ride from my campsite to the nearby picnic shelter to have some work done on my bike and said to my Dad who was talking to another rider; “it must be a rally- I’m drinking, riding, and not wearing my gear.” I had recently finished a beer, breaking the group’s never-drink-and-ride rule. I did put on my helmet for the short jaunt, which seemed overkill compared to the rest of riders riding around the site. Most riders traveling short distances within the campsite wore no helmet or accompanying gear. Riders suited up for an out of camp ride
were always wearing at a minimum a helmet, but most had on the full “BMW uniform.” While one is in a considerably safer situation riding around a grassy campground at speeds less than 5MPH, there could be other reasons than practicality for this breach of normal behavior. Within the in-group of fellow BMW riders, at a campground, riders are most at their riding-backstage. Even with relative strangers, riders discuss the common bond they feel with each other. It could be that in this crowd riders may be feeling comfortable enough that they no longer feel a need to project the image of a “BMW rider,” for to be a BMW rider is to be fully geared up. But to have your tent set up and your can of beans already mixed into the giant vat of “dump stew” for the communal dinner is to have already ensured your place at the group’s table. Out on the open road dangers do increase, and so does the risk of being misidentified. (Fieldnotes)

**Owning a BMW**

Austin and Gagne (2008) discuss how the shared value of safety, illustrated through protective gear, contributes to the strong collective identity felt among BMW motorcyclists, but their description of what equals safety for BMW riders largely ends there (p. 432). For many, the very act of owning a BMW motorcycle confers a strong sense of identity as it is the sacred symbol of this particular group (Austin, 2009, p. 70) but also emerges as a key part of their narratives of what constitutes their safety efforts. As Glenn explains, hinting at the importance of control, “for me owning a BMW is a way to mitigate risk. Because for me, they’re just superb handling machines.” In recounting his lifetime of bikes, he heralds his BMWs as the best cornering machines he has experienced. Speed emerges from the data as both one of the risks and pleasures of riding, but the ability to go fast needs to be countered effectively for riders to maintain control. Braking is one of the largest challenges here and it was found that two thirds of accidents caused by rider errors involved falling due to over braking or running wide on a corner, again a speed/braking issue (http://www.motorcyclesafetyinfo.com). At a speed of 60mph assuming good tires, ideal road conditions, and maximum reaction speed, a
rider will travel a minimum of 134 feet in the idealized minimum-distance braking situation (http://www.motorcyclesafetyinfo.com). BMW Motorrad was the first company to offer an electronic/hydraulic ABS on motorcycles, and did so in 1988. Today, BMWs feature integrated ABS brakes and Automatic Stability Control (ASC) a system that prevents the real wheel from spinning uncontrolled and together these systems “help ensure a higher standard of safety on the road” (webBikeWorld, n.d.).

**ABS Brakes**

The most prominent aspect to what makes a BMW safe to the riders I spoke with is the Anti-lock Brake System (ABS). Seven out of eleven riders spoke to the importance of ABS brakes to them. Most of these discussions of ABS involved emergency or near-emergency situations in which a combination of quick reaction speed and the bike’s ability to stop while at a high rate of speed meant riders could re-tell the tale. Findings indicate that motorcycles with ABS are 37% less likely to be involved in fatal crashes as opposed to non-ABS bikes (Teoh, 2010). Kyle describes an encounter in Texas where he was riding in heavy traffic when all of a sudden cars in front of him stopped:

> I grabbed the hand brake and the rear brake—if I had grabbed either one I’m sure it would have done the same thing [linked brakes]. But it slowed me down so fast and so tremendously…It kept me from getting killed. Because I was running probably 85 miles per hour and I hit the back end of a Hummer but I hit it at the point that I was coming to a screeching halt and eh, I think any other bike, any other bike I probably woulda gotten killed, or severely gotten hurt. (Kyle)

This increased technology adds to rider’s ability to control their edgework, as this adds to their feelings of power over the machine. Jake, who is rather new to the BMW subculture but is being ushered in by his father and grandfather, spoke of ABS brakes, but not with the admiration as the many of the other riders do. When looking to buy his first bike his
Dad did not approve of his original choice because it did not have ABS brakes. Jake’s grandfather had recently been in an accident and claimed that ABS brakes were the reason he is still alive. Jake was not so certain of the “gospel of ABS” that some proclaim, saying; “If that’s your thing I think it’s nice, but I don’t think I’m going to die by sitting on a bike that doesn't have ABS” but gave in to his father and grandfather’s wish in the purchase of his first bike, a BMW with ABS.

Jake’s rather unenthusiastic review of ABS brakes is an interesting perspective since throughout the interviews most of the opinions related to safety were rather aligned, and highly favorable of safety at any cost. While some riders did not mention ABS as part of the specific safety conscious efforts this dissent towards the importance of ABS was the most openly in disagreement towards the overall BMW ethos of safety. This is also suggestive of the process of being indoctrinated into the BMW subculture, something that not every rider successfully makes it through, but this rider’s opinion hints to the process of a normative shift occurring. It would be interesting to follow up with this young rider in a few years and see if he is a more entrenched BMW community member and if his position on ABS brakes has changed.

*Maintenance*

Besides having good brakes, the issue of maintenance emerges when riders discuss how owning a BMW is in their strategies for safety. Safety through a mechanically sound bike is a key tenet of the BMW community and during my experience in “Camp Gears” a two-day program for young/novice riders run and taught by BMW enthusiasts, general maintenance was the starting lesson and a key emphasis. Within the BMW community, working on your bike, or “wrenching” is a passion of
many, and is a status symbol in the community (Austin & Gagne, 2008, p. 438) although no one in my sample self-identified as being largely into that subset of the motorcycling activity. Through efforts of careful maintenance riders are engaging in careful planning and organization that adds to their feelings of control over the experience (Laurendeau, 2006; Lyng, 1990). Mary states that as part of her safety equipment, “I think that having a mechanically prepared bike and knowing that your brakes are right where they ought to be, your clutch is right where it ought to be, and having it adjusted to fit you” all play into her efforts. Charles always changes his tires before they need to be changed and in general tries to keep his bike “at a top notch mechanically.” As discussed in the introduction, tires are a key “tell” in the community, as they do not lie. How one cares for their tires reveals much about their commitment to maintenance and safety. I made this gaffe once, showing up at a rally with tires past due that were rather bald. Following an interview, with my bike parked in the foreground of my campsite, I suffered some slight negative sanctions as a rider elaborated on his efforts of keeping a mechanically sound bike as part of his safety regime by pointing out my tires as he said “see, like your tires, I’d never let mine get so low.” This is a subtle, yet powerful statement. One does not want to lose face in that way, especially since it is such an easy fix. My failure to keep my tires current both means a tangible increase of risk I face through decreased traction and means a loss of face to my fellow riders. Similar to the social policing that Laurendeau faced when skydiving after a period of time off and was told by others what gear to use (Laurendeau, 2006, p. 191), I was tactfully reminded to not attempt to go further out on the edge than I was capable of handling.
Skills, Training, and Education

Riders, like other edgeworkers, lay claim to certain skills, (Lyng, 1990, p. 858), acknowledging that “the better rider you are,” the more capability you have to minimize the risks of riding a motorcycle and are thus a safer rider. Riders greatly stress the importance of training and education, and it plays a strong role in their explanations of what it takes to be safe. Furthermore, achievements in educational trainings serve to identify riders as more serious and help ensure a more respected identity of edgeworker. Kyle places emphasis on being prepared mentally and physically, and describes BMW riders as ones that have taken “measures as far as education, and rider skills training.” The Motorcycle Safety Foundation, or MSF, is an oft-discussed third party organization among BMW riders. Among riders, the MSF is such a cultural assumption that one young rider, Mike, fairly fresh from his MSF class, referred to it just as “the class,” which among riders could only signify the MSF. All of the new riders I spoke with had taken the MSF basic rider education course as a first/early step of riding, as was the case with my beginning miles. Endorsements of the class ring high; John calls it “the best thing ever,” riders recommend it to all their friends thinking about starting to ride, and a sales employee at the dealership (who was once an MSF instructor) talks new/potential customers into taking it. This is not to say this is the only opinion of the MSF, but only once, in all my time being around riding, has the worth of the class been publicly called into attention.

Although the MSF is the most often discussed form of training and education, efforts to become a better rider takes other forms as well. Mary believes in reading and Glenn has “read enough books where I’ve internalized that [strategy of scanning] in
terms of just watching.” This reading takes the forms of books, the MOA ON (Owner’s News), other print motorcycle publications and internet forums. Mary states “Now I’m on so many forums, any time someone has an accident BMW riders tend to tear it apart, analyze everything.” By reading and engaging in digital discussions focused on risk and riding these riders make “an effort to try not have [what ever mistake was made] be common,” explaining, “it’s part of why people share.”

Being Conspicuous

Another commonly cited strategy of riders revolves around conspicuousness, being seen by others. This ironic meaning as it relates to the “looking glass” nature of the self is not to be missed (Cooley, 1964). Being conspicuous is a direct counter to one of the more uncontrollable risks, other drivers. Through various efforts to manipulate gear and equipment, riders can attempt to lay claim to some control over the uncontrollable actions of other drivers on the road. This is a major risk as research has identified that the failure of motorists to detect and recognize motorcycles in traffic in the predominating cause of motorcycle accidents (webBikeWorld, n. d.). While a rider has no way to control, or even avoid the unpredictable move of an inattentive driver, they often make every effort to minimize the uncontrollable odds of not being seen. Riders are searching for control, and make efforts wherever possible to try to carve out ownership of their experience. This is difficult and riders often turn to themselves to make up for their lack of control over others.

On such way riders do this is through wearing riding gear as part of their ATGATT ensemble that adds to their visibility. Most, if not all of the gear commonly associated with BMW riders have built in reflexive material, and Mark “wear[s]
appropriate safety gear and everything I own has extra reflexivity on it.” Charles always wears his reflexive safety vest, like ones seen on highway construction crews, over his armored jacket. Being seen by others can be achieved by other methods, and riders make extensive modifications to their bikes to this effect. Glenn explains that in an effort to counter the unavoidable accident caused by an inattentive driver “I’ve added auxiliary lighting, which helps me see at night, but more, every bit as important to me, being seen during the day.” Further, he has added extra reflective material to the back of his bike, wears a high visibility jacket, a white helmet, and has worn vests and reflexive stripes, all to help him be seen. Another rider, Lisa, added “enormous ugly driving lights” to her bike after a near miss involving other traffic.

Adding lights was high on my list of bike modifications as a new bike owner. Spending between $300 and $500 was a priority after a few rides around the dark rolling hills or my first long stretch of empty, yet deer-filled, highway. The increase in my night vision and visible light pattern during the day was enormous. While I was made this “mod” for functional and safety-related reasons, the change this gave me in terms of status is not missed. Now my bike represented a more serious ride, more outfitted, and better suited for regular riding in more conditions. I was signaling my presence to those non-attentive drivers while also telling those attentive BMW riders that I was not a rider who took my serious leisure lightly. Looking back, most of my recent bike related purchases, moving me beyond the basic BMW requirement of ATGATT have been visibility based. As my skills have progressed I feel more and more in control of my machine and my reactions, yet I am still brutally aware of the unknown other driver. I’ve added 3M reflexive light sticker panels on my helmet and nearly every surface of the
back of the bike, and after attending the MOA national rally purchased extra and expensive flashing LED brake lights and an electric-green safety vest. These last two purchases round out my efforts in the realm of conspicuousness to the near pinnacle, and serve to bring me more into line with that visualization of that “ideal” BMW rider. Here again, the blended purposes of edgework control and identity signifiers help explain riders’ actions.

“A “Farkle” or “Fancy And Really Kool Likely Expensive” accessory is a moniker often used to describe an aftermarket addition like auxiliary lights. While the definitive etymology of the term is unknown, among some it also represents a “Functional Sparkle.” This term is surprisingly apropos as it perfectly describes the duality of “farkles” in the BMW community. At times, if not mostly, “farkles” serve functional purposes related to safety; helping to light the road, alerting other drivers, monitoring tire inflation levels and to comfort; buffering wind, offering varied leg positions, and supplying cruise control. But these functional additions are also “sparkles,” serving to add appeal, status, and further represent membership identity. Farkles are not unique to the BMW community, although there appears, much like the riding gear, that there is a somewhat standard wish list for riders as they deck out their ride. As Wheaton (2000) describes in her study of parasailing and among Kidder’s (2006) bike messengers, equipment is central to member’s identity within the community. Willis (1978) discovered individuals’ relation to the use of their motorcycle provided a basis for hierarchies, with riskier riders being more highly rated. However, in the BMW community there appears more nuanced ways members show their hierarchical status in
the group. Rather than just risky riding being valued, with the subcultural emphases on mileage (Austin, 2009, p. 82), education, training, and safety, there are more avenues for winning the accolades of others in the group. This research did not set out to specifically exhaust these categories, but through the use of “farkles,” riders do make gains in their appearance to others. Like many groups of “Boys and their Toys,” consumption clearly serves as a method of entrenching ones membership and identity, the authenticity of these representations notwithstanding (Horowitz, 2001). While accessories are often added in the name of safety and comfort, there exists an interesting paradox.

While “farkles” illustrate a duality in terms of safety and identity, they also allow BMW riders an avenue for increased edgework and risky experiences. A strong tenet in the world of BMW touring riders is long distance riding and through the addition of comfort related “farkles” motorcycle riders work to control the edge that accompanies high mileage riding. Many touring motorcyclists take on extra, and different risks than the often imagined speed-related risks when on the road for multiple days, sometimes in sanctioned events like the 50 cc Quest, a 50 hour race spanning two continental U.S. coasts (www.ironbutt.com). These events are on end of the spectrum of long distance riding certainly, but represent the ideal for many riders aspiring to the touring mindset. Riding multiple days on high mileage trips adds to the risk that riders put themselves in, not only through more time on the road, but through road fatigue and the subsequent loss of awareness. Being comfortable is a huge part of the “Farkle” industry, as riders must maintain some level of comfort if they are to successfully engage in serious long distance riding. In order to “go beyond my tired limits” that long distance riding requires, most riders need to add comforts. Glenn has:
…modified foot pegs that put my feet in a better situation, I have a lambs wool seat pad, that is much more comfortable and I don’t sweat as much sitting on, so I can definitely ride longer than if not. The fact that the bike has cruise control and heated grips and heated seats- I think that makes it a lot safer to be able to have feeling in your hands than not. And I’ve added an aftermarket windshield that gives me better coverage, and less head and neck fatigue, fighting a lot of head wind or something, a windshield helps break that up. (Glenn)

Even in his words, the two concepts of comfort and safety are blended. By being more comfortable through his “farkles,” he is being safer. Mary, expanding on how AGATT is a very purposeful strategy of hers’, discusses how gear as related to comfort is also central. By being comfortable from the elements she thinks of herself as safer because she is less distracted. Being undistracted is a major concern for riders, as “loss of awareness” was one of the most common risk factors identified. At times, comfort might be about simple physical comfort; knees in the right position, less wind “noise” buffering around ones’ head, or the right bend at the elbow. Most likely though, by removing the distracting nags of physical discomfort riders are able to focus more on the ride and approaching the edge.

Related to issues of distraction and “Farkles” is the debate over electronic gadgets. While some might chastise riders for adding electronic gadgets and potentially distracting interfaces to ones’ cockpit, for some the use of electronics adds to their safety. For the two informants who make this connection, they specially frame potentially distracting electronics as an asset because they remove distractions or aid in the ability to focus. For Mary, a high mileage winner amongst the U.S. BMW community, her GPS is a part of her safety equipment in that it allows her to

know where I am situationally [sic] and I know I haven’t missed the road I’m looking for. I know I don’t have to be distracted by that. Where is that
sign, and then, get hit by the person you know, who came out of nowhere. So I think of that as safety equipment… (Mary)

Listening to music is a topic highly debated on the forums and riders claim that listening to music either distracts or adds to ones ability to focus. Glenn utilizes music as an enhancement to his ability to stay focused “when I can’t stop riding and I need to keep riding and I’m feeling drowsy.” While at times the music is more for enjoyment “the music will really help me stay more awake and alert.” Music, since it boosts his ability to focus, increases his control as he rides at the edge “I think that enhances my safety if I find myself you know, needing to push on beyond what I might normally like to be doing.” Personally, the use of music helps me remove distracting elements and “get into the zone,” as other research has suggested that music aids in the maintenance of a flow state (Karageorghis & Priest, 2002) This idea, of the nature of increased focus through accessories borders on the following discussion of the subjective nature of the riding experience, but the remaining objective strategies warrant complete discussion.

Being Aware

Being aware was a huge mental tactic discussed by riders, if not the most of all categories—mental or physical. Awareness is expressed through a varity of adjectives that are found throughout riders’ recollections. “Focus” was the most utilized descriptor, and appears in the interviews 40 times. “Aware” was used 32 times followed by some variation of paying “attention” at 23 times, and “watching” appeared 22 times. Riding presents interesting challenges and Kyle emphasizes the importance of “being aware” since “you know how things can change so quickly and so drastically” while on a bike. James simply states “you have to be totally focused on your riding” and all the riders in
some form echoed this mindset. When riders reflect on their near misses, they often point the finger at their lack of awareness at the time or time leading up the incident. John, who was almost boxed into an accident is confident he would not be in the same situation again “cause I would never let a vehicle get me in that position” since “I’d be much more aware.” Being aware thus emerges as another strategy for control; if a rider is aware of potential threats they are controlling having to deal with those risks at all. For others, their awareness is what allowed them to make it out successfully. Glenn, speaking to utilizing awareness in conjunction with other strategies states “you ought to be aware” of the risk that is “inherent to the nature of the sport” and accordingly, “ride with good gear, have a good helmet, and be hyper-vigilant while you’re out on the road.”

Outward Focus

Two categories clearly emerged from the data on rider’s types of awareness. The first, and most often discussed was “outward focus.” In this category, when riders discuss the importance of paying attention it is to factors, risks, situations, and surroundings external to themselves. Kyle states that you must “always be prepared for the dangers that could happen” since they are “unforeseen and they come at you from every angle.” Watching the road and for other drivers are the two central sub-divisions of riders’ external attention. James stressed the importance of paying attention to the road “anytime you hit a rise, and you have to be concerned about what’s on the far end if you haven’t travelled the road beforehand” and to other people, “you have to worry about other people out on the roads, people pulling out and doing stupid things in front of you.” Glenn states that he has internalized the mindset of scanning to the point that he is “always watching out for the other guy, watching the other car.” Other drivers (the thing
riders have zero control over) are the most frightening and upon reflection, I know I
have said, “if there were not any other cars on the road this would be perfectly safe.” Jake
says he focuses the most in an attempt to stay safe while he’s taking turns and “every
time I see a car.”

*Inward Focus*

The second form of alertness that riders employ I term “in-ward focus.” While
riders focus on potential threats from the road and other drivers, it appears an equal
amount of focus is directed at the self among some riders. Central to this theme is rider’s
awareness of what they often term “their limits.” Riders make attempts to be cognizant of
this subjective limit, and try to not “override” that often—that is, ride above where they
deem their skill set. For some riders, this stems from speed, lean angle, and the risks
associated with the commonly conceptualized aggressive riding and some riders strive to
not push themselves and “do something stupid.” For other riders, not as apt to describe
themselves as the fast, aggressive edgeworker, their awareness of self involves the BMW
or touring risks of long distance riding. Riders spoke of risks like road fatigue and tunnel
vision and focus/awareness emerged as the key technique for dealing with this. Mike
describes his efforts to stay in-ward focus when on the road:

[I try to] just always be observant; taking breaks, staying hydrated, staying rested.
If I’m too tired I’ll take a break- I’ll camp wherever or get a motel. You have to
know how far to push yourself and know when to stop. (Mike)

As a novice rider slowly gaining my familiarity and comfort, nearly all of my
initial riding was done in small segments. This was because as a beginner, the process of
scanning and constantly mentally predicting was an exhausting process. I would return
from one-hour rides in my early days borrowing my Dad’s bike feeling completely
drained. I had just seen too much flash past my eyes, too quickly, all while striving to notice, take in, scan, predict, and execute on a never-ending feedback cycle, all while physically exerting myself to control a 622-pound machine. Leaving from home on a small loop allowed for breaking down my experiences into more manageable rides. Also, I would not partake on one of these “leisure day rides” unless I was feeling mentally prepared for the task. A tough day at school, distracted about the big presentation at work tomorrow, already feeling a little tired, roads wet from rain this morning…all perfect reasons to pass on a fun yet demanding leisure activity for a few hours. However, while on the touring-road riders might feel pressure to ride. If riding with others, there is a timeline, or a reservation for the next night, there might not be the luxury to not ride, which when your ability to focus is compromised, is an increase to your risk. On the road for my first long distance solo trip of about 2,400 miles during my first year of ownership I encountered many miles, and many mornings where my old “day-trip” self would have easily opted not to ride.

When a rider’s sense of in-ward focus alerts them of a mismatch between rider and the road, ride, or conditions, this is often described as “not clicking.” For some this subjective assessment means that the ride is over for the day, or for others, they just ride slower. “Not clicking” is the antithesis of “clicking” which could also be described as “in the zone,” in a state of flow, or riding at the edge, feelings all riders were able to give voice to. Lisa describes her “not clicking” as: “you know there are some days when I’m just not hitting any curve right. And you know, of course once you blow a curve, it gets your heart rate up because you’ve gone into a curve too fast, you know, it ruins the rest of them.” On these days, Lisa feels that “it’s getting to the point where it’s dangerous to be
on the bike” and she makes the choice to turn around and either stop for the day or ride as a passenger on her husband’s bike, a fellow BMW rider. James on the other hand, self-aware of “where I’m at” and of the days “where it’s not going smoothly,” simply slows down or rides “well below where I normally would.” This awareness results in an amazing amount of control riders feel that are able to bring to their edgework. Through simple choices, often related to speed, riders create a form of “adjustable edgework” while they engage in a new form of “policing” (Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006), self-policing. While riders still have to contend with many of the risks of the road, through simply riding slower riders can change their environments in ways that other edgeworkers might not be able to.

Some riders attribute their important mindset of focus to courses like the MSF, since Lisa reports graduates are “taught the key ways to focus and ways to avoid the most common kinds of accidents.” Due to the risks of riding a motorcycle, some riders feel fear, or at least some acknowledge fear and some point to this fear as the primary source of their attention-paying motivation and ability. Kyle describes how he keeps the fact that “you can get your ass killed in a blink of an eye” in the back of his mind. This leads him to ride “always on point-you know, like a damn scout.” Jake describes how even sitting at a stop sign he is afraid of the generalized other driver since they often “don’t think.” By being fearful, of the car turning in from of you, or the deer, or about the unforeseen gravel in the corner ahead, this fear shifts to focus. Lisa explains how she uses her fear:

It’s sort of been self-adjusting the more experience I get as a rider. The fear lessens to the point where it’s not a constant nagging. And in a lot of ways it’s changed more to just focus. It’s helped me pay more attention. Conversely, the more experience I get, I have to make sure not to get too comfortable and forget
about the fear factor and the focus. You know I think that’s a mistake that an awful lot of experienced riders make, is to get too comfortable. (Liza)

When trying to make sense of how the ideas incorporated within focus it became apparent that this subjective realm lies at the heart of the risk experience. There is no denying the importance of the risks and safety strategies identified by riders, but it is how they interpret these objective aspects that is central to understanding the nature of control. It is more straightforward to identify risks and ways of dealing with these risks. However, when riders began to verbalize focusing, more complex themes emerged, that all spoke to some subjective interpretation. Riders intense focusing leads to feelings of rush, the zone, or edgework emotions. Further, by maintaining strict standards of observation and scanning riders began to answer the tough questions of how does an edgeworker “deal with the risk?” Focusing, while a strategy, also yielded to motives of control for some riders. These themes, of control and coping with risk fill the narratives, and are the most universal of the risk-based data collected in this study as in all walks of life individuals seek out feelings of dominion over their lives and experiences (Lupton, 2002).

Subjective Interpretations and Roles of Risk

“If the risks weren’t manageable it wouldn’t make any sense to be on the road”

-Charles

Much of riders’ discourse regarding risk is aimed at controlling or minimizing risk. Through communal “policing of the edge,” (Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006) wearing all the gear all the time, owning a BMW, being conspicuous, having intense focus, and emphasizing skill, training, and education riders make strong claims of control over the road. However, many still recognize some of the risk as uncontrollable and
undeniably, risk is a part of what motivates these individuals to participate in the edgework they do. Without delving into a deep exploration of the personal psychological factors that push people to take risk, like the work of Bernard (1968), Klausner (1968), and Zucherman et al. (1964), I instead wish to explore the phenomenological and symbolic nature of the risk, the processes of coping, and sense-making riders engage in. Thus this work attempts to shed additional light on previously studied topics like how edgeworkers understand risk (Lyng & Snow, 1986; Natalier, 2001) and how they redefine the risks (Lois, 2005) instead of what motivates such behavior (Allman et al., 2009).

One “edge” embedded within the practices of conducting edgework is the boundary between the positives and negatives of risk itself. On one hand, riders take enormous pains to control the risk and contend too much risk is certainly undesirable. However, as one of Lupton’s research subjects states, “life would be pretty dull without risks” and without the risk much of the resulting sensory experience would be lost (2002, p. 117). When edgeworkers cross the line they enter what Thompson (1967) calls “the place of definitions” (p. 345) and riders engage in the following strategies to define their experience as controllable; blaming the self, denying risk, redefining risk, normalizing risk, accepting risk, and appealing to higher loyalties.

*A Necessary Balance Between Risk and Control*

In order to gain positive sensations and emotions, riders must be able to maintain a personally appropriate sense of the balance between risk and the fear that jointly accompanies it. The sensations alone are not the goal, as the sensation in isolation, without the corresponding feelings of control become scary or too risky to find pleasure
within. Glenn’s reflections began to help crystallize this idea as he described those moments “right at the edge:”

It gets your attention right now, that’s for sure. It’s certainly unsettling….and it really messes with your head, it really will break your rhythm. You can be doing fine, and you can have just a little loose tire, and it can take a long time to recover, if you’re just not mentally you know, able to deal with that. But yeah, it can be pretty scary, obviously anytime you’re scared like that, there’s the adrenaline reaction and stuff, but it’s not enjoyable, it’s not anything you would like to repeat often. Other things, like super fast acceleration- that kind of exhilarating…there’s a lot of adrenaline involved with that but that’s another thing, that’s my choice, and that’s under control, it’s this…sensation of maybe losing control that, you know…that is not good. (Glenn)

It appears that it is a gross over-simplification to describe most edgeworkers as “adrenaline junkies.” With a careful eye it becomes apparent that adrenaline is not the only goal. The exact same action, the rear wheel losing the slightest bit of traction can either cause a heart to soar or as Frank puts it, “have your bike eaten by your asshole.” If careful, delicate, and strong acceleration through the apex and exit of a corner is used appropriately, the slight wiggle of the bike is the perfect experience of being in control right at the edge. However, a patch of gravel, sand, or cinders can yield the same wobble, and is a completely undesirable feeling, one riders feel largely powerless over. These are the moments that ruin days and some riders never recover from. The physiological response to a fight or flight input needs to be symbolically interpreted, and through feelings of control riders are able to enjoy these experiences. This finding is confirming that, “notions of control remain central to risk-taking and are an important part of its pleasures” (Lupton, 2002, p. 123). Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) coined the “Golden Rule of Flow” to describe the optimal challenge-skills balance necessary for achieving a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and state that flow can be predicted by a
person’s subjective perceptions and not by objective challenges or skills presented. Feelings of skill, resulting in feelings of control seem central to the experience.

A Positive Balance

When balance is found and riders are successful in physically and mentally controlling the edge they receive quite pleasurable sensations and emotions. For many of the riders, their intense focus on internal and external situations is the engine behind the beneficial sensations and emotions they experience. James, a 40-year rider, explains it succinctly, that through his focus on everything “you’re doing plus a whole lot of other things…it takes your mind off all the other things.” Without the underlying fear, potentially reframed as verbiage of safety and control, and the corresponding extreme focus riders bring to the experience, it seems this and other benefits would be lost. Many describe how riding helps them take their mind off the rest of the world, except for having to pay attention, and Mary reports that she is often so focused on the road that she does not comprehend things outside of what effects her riding. John explains that when riding “you have to be concentrated on so many things…nothing else matters.” Because of this, many riders describe riding as a form of therapy for them, using terms like a “tune up” or “blowing out the cobwebs” to describe a quick local ride that “fills the tanks” of one’s mental capacity to deal with life.

Like other edgeworkers, motorcycle riders at times struggle to explain the ineffable (Ferrell et al., 2001; Lyng, 1990) and most riders initially relied on statements like “you know” to try to help make sense of the feelings they experience. Without prompting, riders often invoked other activities studied as edgework activities such as rock climbing, scuba diving, and skydiving to try to help explain the feelings they
experience but also described riding a motorcycle as flying, a ballet, dance, and a
gyroscopic as they searched for adequate descriptors of the subjective experience. Many
of the descriptions emphasized a sense of merging between the person and bike and some
even went as far as to describe these feelings of “being in sync” as “thought control.”
Freedom was another often-cited sensation/emotion and Lisa utilized the ironic yet
frequently made metaphor of loving to “feel the wind in [her] hair,” even though “I never
do feel the wind in my hair because I always wear a helmet.” Riders’ explanations of
what it feels like to be at the edge is almost wholly confirming of other research into the
sensations and emotions of edgework and riders describe “being in the zone,”
exhilaration, enjoyment, shifts in temporal time/space, and even the pleasures of sex
(Lipscombe, 1999; Lyng & Snow, 1986, p. 164). Kyle explained the sensations as “like
when you get to that point after a series of wild ass turns and you’ve been pushing it to
the ultimate freaking limit and you’re just having an exhilarating feeling,” stopped,
apologized, and continued to say “it’s just like damn cumming.”

Not all riders enjoy these types of sensations, and riding multiple days on high
mileage trips is another source of valued sensations and emotions for touring riders.
Sensations stemming from high speed and low lean angles is perhaps more obvious but
the rush of the risks from long days on the road is a push enjoyed by many in the touring
community. Charles, who doesn’t classify himself as a risky rider says,

I’m not into the thrill. Some people are here for adrenaline, and, and if
they’re not pushing the envelope to the very extent they can, and leaning
their bike as much as they can, they’re not riding. I’ve never had the need
to do that. (Charles)
Some might dismiss Charles as a non-risk taker with that proclamation. However, Charles instead favors the experience and sensations related to long distance edgework, stating “the further you go, the better…that’s one reason I do long distance riding. I mean, probably go beyond my tired limits, getting tired, but that feeling when you get off a bike after you’ve been riding all day, that’s the best tired you can ever feel.” Charles’ notion of not being into the thrill might be true when compared to the commonly pictured “thrill” of riding a motorcycle, but seems to instead be compatible with another type of thrill, one more specially valued and sought after in this community. For there is certainly thrill involved when one rides well beyond their tired limits, into spaces and times of acute awareness while flirting with the loss of focus that road hypnosis brings.

Reclaiming Balance

When riders make the mistake to cross over the edgework boundary into the undesirable aspects of the ride; danger, death, loss of control, or insanity (Lyng, 1990) they must cross back over if they ever hope to “get back in the zone.” As flow is discussed as the balance between challenge and skill, crossing the edge represents an imbalance weighted towards challenge. In reflecting on risky experiences edgeworkers search for feelings of control if they wish to take risks again (Lois, 2005). Wing-suit base jumper and edgeworker Chris McNamara in the film The Sharp End says “I’m never base jumping anymore unless I really think it’s worth it and its safe…you’re only doing it if you feel in control” and in similar ways, riders retrospectively work to frame their potentially leisure career ending moments and emotions as under control (Mortimer & Rosen, 2007).
Often, riders’ analysis of their “riskiest moments on the road” can be seen as techniques of neutralization that aim to bring feelings of control back into their hands. This appears to be the case in both near misses where no incident occurred and in the face of actual consequences; accidents, collisions, and going off the road. Interestingly, participants were never asked to describe what caused them to experience these moments of risk at or just over the edge and were only prompted with the question of “tell me about your riskiest moments on a BMW.” This could be for one of, or perhaps a combination of a few reasons; First, riders might simply be recounting these experiences and like with any good story, setting the scene is important. Riders might just be including as much of the background and details as possible. Second, riders might be engaging in a form of impression management; in cases where riders are externally attributing cause they may be attempting to save face as they talk with another rider. Third, by outlying the causes of these scary moments, riders may also be adding to their risk avoidance strategies. By attempting to catalogue and learn from these mistakes, engaging in what Mary discussed as a part of her on-line forum experience, riders are tearing apart their accidents, looking for faults, and more importantly, areas of improvements. Lastly, and perhaps most important for this research, riders must have an explanation for the risk they engage in which is central to making sense of and being at peace with the risk. If there is no reason for the incident, it is purely random and utterly uncontrollable. Natalier (2001) found that motorcyclists typically adopt two neutralization techniques, self-blame, and invoking fate to de-emphasize expert systems stating that riding is a risky endeavor. This research confirms these findings but adds techniques of denying the risk (Laurendeau, 2006), redefining the risk (Lois, 2005),
normalizing the risk, accepting the risks, and appealing to higher loyalties (Anderson & Taylor, 2010) to help them feel that their behavior is morally and personally acceptable.

**Blame the Self for Loss of Control**

One category of responses centered on riders blaming themselves for their lack of control. This represents an “easy” fix; if riders blame their own lack of control as part of the cause for the incident, this leaves room for them to correct for the next time, through an increased amount of focus or the utilization of other of the objective strategies discussed above. This is supported with Natalier’s (2001) finding that by admitting their own lack, riders were “investing themselves with the power to determine the outcome of future rides, and the possibility of control and immunity from further accidents in reinstated” (p. 74). Examples include accounts like “riding faster than I should have been for the road,” not thinking ahead enough riding over blind hills, being distracted by scenery and “zoning out,” or being in a “lax frame of mind.” Glenn’s story of a near-catastrophic situation is a perfect exemplar of this reclaiming strategy:

And I, with the sun, and the scenery, and everything else, I just got into a real zone and I wasn’t paying real close attention, and I wasn’t leading, cause I was following this guy, well…and we were going pretty fast. And eh, he was pretty far out in front of me, and I didn’t realize that I looked up and I realized that I was gaining on him really really really fast and that he had stopped and his fancy badass looking Harley had this little tiny teardrop taillight that had no, you just could not see…and um, he was stopped at an intersection- a 2 way stop a very busy fast crossroad… and it was like, there’s no way I am going to stop. (Glenn)

In this vignette, the use of blaming the self can be clearly seen as Glenn explains he was in “a zone” and was not paying attention. Interestingly, he also places blame on a few environmental factors as contributing to his lack of awareness and also on the
“badass looking Harley” and its tiny taillight. While these other variables may contribute to the situational risks and serve to distance Glenn from other types of riders, they all center on his inability to pay attention, and are thus rather correctable.

Denial of Risk— “I Can Control It”

When riders make it through potentially dangerous situations where they narrowly avoid crossing the edge they often utilize a “denial of risk,” returning to the themes of objective strategies relating to control. Riders make claims of their ability to control the risks they may encounter through superior riding ability, beliefs that “I can mitigate a lot of the risks to a tremendous degree,” and a mindset that much of the risk is “self created in terms of how alert you are and what kind of a rider you are.” They further attribute their success to a combination of the objective strategies, helping to make the chances of repeating such successful dances with fate something they can positively influence again. This was also found among the skydivers studied by Laurendeau (2006) who frame the averting of a close call as “evidence that they are in control of their own destinies” (p. 592). Scary incidents are framed as positive experiences, confirming of evidence of control and the possession of the “right stuff.” Essentially, their control over something—gear, their reactions, and their skill—allowed them to survive. In Glenn’s near miss discussed above, after zoning out, he was faced with the risk of skidding to a stop in the middle of a dangerous intersection and instead chose to accelerate through the intersection known to be one of the most deadly in the region. In this way, he took control of his involvement in the scene, as opposed to being powerless to the already enacted force of the brakes on full lock. Instead of these near misses adding to the
redefine fear

While riders acknowledge that fear is a part of their experience, it seems important to many that this is redefined. John oscillates in how he answers to the question of how he feels about the risk. On one hand he states that “I don’t think about the risk and I guess I don’t care about the risk” but then he also describes how he is almost always thinking about the risks, but not in a “foreboding dreadful way.” In some ways this represents “postponement,” a strategy of neutralization made by shoplifters in which they momentarily put feelings out of mind to be dealt with later (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003, p. 546). Indeed, statements support this, as riders would rather focus on the elements of safety facing them as opposed to thinking specifically about the dangers. However, John is not just postponing thoughts or risk because he is also actively thinking about the risks and this is a strategy for him, in that “anytime you ride and you’re not slightly fearful of something or someone, you’re not paying attention.” Here it seems important to claim that the potential risk is not something a rider is worried about, even to the point of never thinking about it. Specific risk or worst-case scenarios might not enter a rider’s head, but a generalized risk, manifest in fear, is always present. By doing this, riders can utilize fear to their advantage, using it as opposed to being used by it. Mary’s experience mirrors this idea and she tells of a story where at a gas station, riding solo, she had someone ask, “Aren’t you terrified?” Her answer of “Yes, and if I quit being terrified I’ll quit riding” seems to illustrate the emotion re-framing that Lois (2001) discusses in the edgework of search and rescue workers. Mary goes on to explain that she uses her fear as “a tool that I
use, not to get killed. I think it’s really important to be scared.” No longer is her fear defined as a fear, it is instead re-framed as a “tool” that leads to her ability and desire to focus. Fear may also be redefined in a way that it no longer appears as real, as seen with Mary’s earlier strategy of pretending riding was a video game with the chance for another life because as a mother and wife she could not tolerate the risks.

This research seems to suggest that male and female riders engage in this redefinition of fear in similar ways, as opposed to the gendered techniques found by Lois (2001). These findings seem a direct support to Natalier’s (2001) research which claims that in the face of dangers motorcycle riders claim ambivalence as a coping strategy. However, riders’ initial claims of “I don’t think about the risk and I guess I don’t care about the risk” are only superficial, and actually represent a much deeper picture of strategies designed at striving for control over the uncontrollable through both a postponing and specific focusing on risk.

**Normalize the Risks of Riding**

In fact many of the riders are highly aware of the risks and attempt to normalize these risks by comparing the risks of riding to others experienced in life. This category, termed, “normalization of risk” is where riders like James states that dealing with the risks of riding is “just like any damn thing in life” and “you have to take your chances, make educated guesses.” Riders often compare the risks they take to that of driving a car, and Jake acknowledges that “if you’re not paying attention and get in a wreck on a bike it’ll hurt a little more” than if the same occurred in a car. As Kyle corroborated, motorcycling “is a risk just like anything else…when you wake up in the morning and you get in your car and you drive off the end of your driveway you’re taking a risk, it’s
like anything else.” If a rider can make the comparison to themselves or others that slipping in the tub and dying is just as likely as dying in a motorcycle accident they are making strong efforts to retain their feelings of control and justifiable risk taking.

Accept Risk—“I’m Going to Crash”

Motorcycle riders will often utilize these strategies in combination to make sense of what they do, and these largely speak to an “acceptance of risk.” It is often widely accepted that a rider will crash and the popular saying goes, “It’s not a question of if you will crash, but when.” This kind of sentiment is echoed in the skydiving community where the saying “You may never have a malfunction, but you may have one on your next jump” is quite often heard. Not only does this statement help to normalize risk but also serves to remind skydivers that the risk is always there and you have to always be paying attention and prepared. When Kyle describes the accident that delayed his nine month road trip for nearly two months he displays resignation, “I knew that it would probably happen on this trip, because I was going to be on the road so long” and Mark discusses how he just has not owned his new bike long enough yet to have one of his most risky moments on it yet. As a part of the “acceptance of risk,” riders explain how they are “at least prepared” and find comfort in knowing that they have done what they could have in order to minimize the risk. James, who has been in one serious accident, is aware that the chances are slim of getting hit again, but recognizes that it could happen again and states with a shrug, “You just have to be prepared.” Jake states that if he does wreck he is wearing the gear to save him, and if that is not enough “it’s probably a really bad mistake and I probably deserve it.” Kyle states, in complete support of ambivalence by both accepting death, yet working to save himself from it; “I might get killed
tomorrow but [laughs] I’m going to have full body armor on and a helmet on and I’m going to have gloves on. I might get killed, but I minimized it, I really have.” When riders do picture their own demise as a result of riding it is not uncommon to hear “I’d rather go that way then—you know—some other way,” in the spirit of skydivers’ claims of “If I was ever gonna die, I suppose I’d want to die that way [jumping]” (Laurendeau, 2006, p. 599).

*Appeal to Higher Loyalties*

Another strategy for riders to find a morally acceptable balance of risk is to “appeal to higher loyalties” to use the categorization first coined by Sykes and Matza (1957). Initially, riders neutralize the risk they engage in by aligning themselves to the higher loyalties of belonging to a subculture that accepts and engages in the same risks. Here, risks are defined as morally acceptable in regard to subcultural morals. Further, riders claim allegiance to the loyalty of their own personal morals regarding what constitutes a life worth living. Suggestive of the appeals of higher loyalty found by Anderson & Taylor (2010) among skydivers, riders make the argument that for them to live they must answer the “romantic pursuit of self-fulfillment” through their risk (p. 50). Bellaby and Lawrenson (2001) also found this among the motorcyclists they studied, that they viewed “motorcycling [as] life enhancing and not to engage in it is to risk wasting your life” (p. 375). Refusing to stop living just because of “a fickle fate” and blending some normalization of risk, Mary states that the risk “is much greater that I would die from boredom, from a heart attack, from not living [and riding].” Some silly accidental death is a greater risk than “not living vividly in life and intensely living.” Kyle refuses to “let all that shit keep me from having fun” and James “can’t imagine not [riding] as
long as I can physically do it.” Charles satirically draws upon the old adage that ships are safest at harbor but they are not built for that, stating it is “the same with a motorcycle, it’s safest in the garage. As long as you stay away from it, since it could fall over on you” to highlight just how ridiculous he feels it is to be held captive by risks. Riders also attribute higher powers of fate, “lucking out,” “fluke timing,” or “an angel watching over me” as they “knock on wood” in reflection on their near misses.

A Failure to Reclaim Balance

Riders utilize a variety of the strategies discussed above and are largely successful, at least in the riders surveyed here. However, the strategy of “blame the self for loss of control” appears to be most pivotal in this process. When riders have difficulty tracing back an error to a mistake they made, the process of making sense of these accidents or near misses is most difficult. Some attribute these mishaps to higher powers like God, fate, luck, or other uncontrollable aspects like the “celestial design” cited by Laurendeau’s (2006) skydivers. This is seen in the accident that left James with a year and a half of physical therapy before he rode again. Riding two-up with his wife they were “doing everything right” when two deer ran sideways right into his bike at exactly the right moment. He explains, the risks were “literally, beyond control.” Wearing the gear was cited as part of what left them able to walk away from the scene, but James was left without much power to reclaim control over the incident.

For some, attributions to fate are not enough, and if riders cannot bring either the negative disastrous experiences or their near misses back to rest on their failures of control they are often unable to regain enough feelings of control to create a positive subjective balance of risk. James’s wife, who had previously accompanied him on
roughly 75% of his riding as a passenger, has ridden very little since the accident. Getting hit from behind caused Lisa’s sister-in-law to give up her bike and stop riding and this type of accident represents one of the most vulnerable times a motorcyclist can experience. Stopped, oftentimes without an escape route, there is little a rider can do even if they are watching their mirrors at every stop as taught in good riding classes. One of Mary’s riskiest moments was when she was hit from behind as she was pulling away from a red light. All of a sudden she passed her husband and devoted riding partner with her hands in the air from the force of being hit from an inattentive driver behind her. This accident was difficult for her “because as much as you do to be safe, something can happen” as she was already “situationally [sic] aware” of who was behind her and does not know what she could have done differently. She reports that she felt like she “had a lot of control over my environment, that I didn’t really have” yet was able to continue riding. The cop who investigated this accident was unable to regain his desire to ride after he was similarly hit from behind in traffic.

For a variety of reasons, some riders are not able to create a positive balance between the risks and benefits. The riders in this research, by definition of the sample, are past their boundary digressions and are still riding. However, it seems to make sense that for the riders unable to use one or more of the subjective strategies discussed above to find their acceptable level of risk, they are left with the only moral choice, to quit riding. Future research could greatly explain this failure to renegotiate the edge by focusing on past riders who have given up their serious leisure pursuit of being a motorcyclist.

There are a number of ways the motorcyclists in this study feel about the risk they engage in. Again, there is much in this study that was found to support the claim that
riders cope with risk through ambivalence. At times riders appear to do everything in their physical and mental capacity to control, mitigate, and remove the risks. Riders make claims like “all risk is controllable, that’s part of the definition” but then end up talking about mitigation of risk as opposed to control. However, riders also claim that “anybody who thinks they have total control of everything…doesn’t understand how the world functions” and without the risk it seems the need for intense focus which results in positive sensations and immense enjoyment would be lost. John further states, “the risk is partially controllable, but yeah, not fully. You’re definitely in somebody else’s hands most of the time.” No matter the side of the ambivalence, riders seem intimately aware of the risks of riding and engage in both objective and subjective strategies in order to successfully ride “the edge” on the road and in their internal processes.

Conclusion and Implications

In this chapter I have addressed issues of objective strategies of safe riding as well as the subjective processes riders engage in as they attempt to make sense of the risk they partake in. These findings have been centered within a corpus of sociological literature that has investigated the varied themes central to edgework practices. By analyzing the experiences of a group that has not yet been specifically studied in this context I have shown that BMW motorcycle riders work to control the uncontrollable, while also gaining identity rewards, through enforcing a cultural norm of safety centered on wearing safety gear, specifically owning a BMW, being conspicuous, accessorizing their bikes, and being diligent in their efforts to be aware. Largely, BMW riders focus on safety, as opposed to the risks but in confirmation of earlier studies, (Natalier, 2001) their narratives are largely ambivalent. Natalier states riders “are ambivalent towards the idea
of risk, and marginalize its significance” while also rejecting the so-called expert knowledge that tells riders they engage in dangerous leisure (p. 66). BMW touring riders do indeed seem ambivalent, on one hand cherishing the risk they and others take but also claiming they are safe and are in control of the risks they engage in. Yet it appears riders do not solely work to marginalize the significant of risk, as their processes for dealing with the edge relies on much more than ignoring it. Rather, riders focus on the edge, recognize that risk is significant, but engage in processes of creating a subjective understanding of risk as in balance with control. Riders do this by blaming themselves in the cases of near misses, redefining fear as a useful tool, attempting to normalize the risks of riding, accepting the risk while also denying it, and appealing to higher loyalties.

The findings of this research both confirm and expand previous literature on edgework. There are interesting results when comparing and contrasting the differences between BMW riders and the other groups of edgeworkers that help to broaden and further define the theory of edgework. The main areas of edgework discussed in this research—a focus on safety, emphasis of skill, strong sensations of awareness, and processes of redefining are also major areas of findings in other research on edgework. Through all of these practices BMW riders are striving for control, seeking dominion over a situation that “verges on complete chaos” that most would see as “uncontrollable” (Lyng, 1990, p. 859.)

First, BMW motorcycle riders emerge as being highly focused on safety, which in many ways seems to differentiate them from many of the risk takers previously studied. This is not to say that the BASE jumpers or skydivers studied (Allman et al., 2009; Ferrell et al., 2001) do not strive for safety, but this research finds an enormous amount
of emphasis placed on being safe by BMW riders. One of the strongest motivating attributes for BASE jumpers to jump is the pursuit of the edge or risk (Allman et al., 2009). BMW riders are on some level searching for this, but overwhelmingly talk about strong cultural norms of “All The Gear All The Time,” the policing of others’ risky practices, and make direct claims of “I am not a risk taker.” This idea stands out compared to the idea that the “ultimate goal of edgework is to survive the experience” (Lyng, 1990, p. 875). It would seem that many of the edgeworkers previously studied embrace, or would embrace the title of edgeworker. I predict that a fair number of BMW riders would initially claim the opposite, that they do not necessarily seek out risks, find pleasure in chaos, or “push the limits” (p. 858). Riders however recognize the necessity of the risk and do search for more danger through increased speed and longer trips. However, these behaviors are rarely framed as pushes of the edge and riders overall seem less likely to claim that the enjoyment of the activity comes from simply the rush. I argue that the notion of edgework is entirely present in this group, but in less overt ways than other groups of edgeworkers. While these edgeworkers are attempting to find the edge, riders like Charles and John state that only part of the time they are “riding full out” and everyone focuses on safety. Further, the BMW community’s practices certainly differ from practices of artificially increasing the risks “as when sky divers jump under the influence of drugs” (Lyng, 1990, p. 862).

Specific to research based on motorcycle riders, the beliefs and practices of BMW riders shown in this research stands nearly alone. Much motorcycling research does not strive for phenomenological understanding of the efforts on the part of riders to stay safe and instead seeks to explain (Bellaby & Lawrenson, 2001, p. 380) subcultures of
consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), cultural images (Wood, 2003), especially that of criminality (Quinn & Koch, 2003) or investigates rate of accidents and the effectiveness of different safety strategies (Auman et al., 2002; Teoh, 2010). Most of the research that could utilize the edgework metaphor are thus of motorcyclists that are already past the edge, are in a group that embraces the beyond-the-edge image, or of incidents of boundary transgression. However, there is a small body of research that attempts to present a contextualized understanding of motorcycling risk. Research by Natalier (2001) investigates how riders cope with crossing the line and Bellaby and Lawrenson (2001) argue that accounts of risks are mutually contested and that “expert” accounts claiming riding is risky has more authority over the public than do counter-claims of riders (p. 384). Austin’s (2009) research (Austin & Gagne, 2008) introduces the importance of edgework in understanding the BMW community’s sense of uniqueness and communal identity, and is the first to claim the actions of BMW riders as edgework. However, the practice of BMW rider’s edgework has yet to be previously explored. By expanding edgework research to this group that may be a less perfect fit than the stereotypical high skydivers or the tipsy riders (Lyng, 1998), I hope to push the edges of what may be considered edgework.

Second, BMW riders have a strong discourse of skill, claiming that they hold special abilities, are typically better operators than others on the road, and that their skill or “road craft” (Bellaby & Lawrenson, 2001) is one of their best methods for staying safe while engaging in risks. These findings are echoed through all the previous edgework literature investigated, and all edgeworkers strive for control through the application of their skills, even though this is an “illusion” (Lyng, 1990). This search for control
through skill is perhaps the most central component of what has been termed Lyng’s “response” theory of risk taking (Donnelly, 2004), as individuals are searching for feelings of control lost in their post-modern lives. Lyng even states “edgework is one of the few experiences in modern life where ‘success’ (survival) can be unambiguously attributed to individual skill” (Lyng, 1990, p. 873). Feelings of skill, even elite skill, motivate BASE jumpers (Allman et al., 2009, p. 240) and Laurendeau investigates the “hook turn” in skydiving, a difficult and risky technique that brings skydivers great pleasure since it takes more skill to make such a high performance parachute perform so well (Laurendeau, 2006, p. 594). The skill required to pull off such a maneuver requires both motor skills and judgment, and skydivers in Laurendeau’s study state in “no uncertain terms” that they have the “skill and experience to control the situation” (p. 595). Laurendeau and Van Brunschot (2006) provide a wonderful explanation of skydivers searching for control as they police each others’ skill development and work to control the interactional and institutional edge, working to ensure that jumpers are not engaging in dangerous jumps without the proper skill. While BMW riders may be demonstrating their skills in different ways the importance they place on being a skilled rider parallels all previous discussions of the importance of skill and control within edgework.

Third, and central to the skills they claim to posses, BMW riders are highly attuned to the importance of awareness. Being focused, paying attention, and watching are often heard phrases discussed as part of the safety practices of BMW riders. For the riders in this research it is this intense focus that leads to the pleasurable sensations and emotions they experience. Largely, the overlaps between the awareness of the riders
studied in this research and other edgeworkers lies within these sensations and emotions. Flow is an oft-used concept to help elaborate on the sensations and emotions of being at the edge, and it is common for edgeworkers to refer to “being in the zone.” Kidder (2006b) states at the “threshold of boredom and anxiety, players can truly focus their attention in the moment” (p. 35) and when riders are “clicking” this is where they must be. Here, at the “golden rule of flow” lies the subjectivity of time (Kidder, 2006; Lyng, 1990), loss of self (Stranger, 1999), nervousness and relaxation (Schneider et al. 2007) and it appears that in many ways BMW riders focus on their engagement at the edge in the same ways as other edgeworkers.

However, the community of riders investigated in this research greatly differs from other communities in the edgework literature on the topic of mind-altering substances. Lyng’s group of skydivers increased the risks they took, as when they jumped under the influence of drugs (1990, p. 862) and Lyng himself, along with fellow skydivers/informants, caught in the drive for edge, redrew the line “by mixing our motorcycle edgework with various forms of intoxication and incapacitation” (Lyng, 1998, p. 230). Among the bike messenger culture studied by Kidder (2006), “drinking and other intoxicants [were] a major component” of the off-work alleycats, or races (p. 359). While BMW riders may work to artificially increase the risks they engage in, as seen with other edgeworkers, and do partake in the use of drugs, I found no evidence to suggest that BMW riders would partake in or condone the mixing of drugs and riding. In fact, riders instead spoke of a general “no drinking rule,” and Charles even suggested that part of his switching from the Harley community to being a BMW rider included never drinking and riding anymore. For me to have one beer and then ride around the
campground stood out to myself and others enough to warrant a joke, a far removal from the direct pressure Lyng (1998) received as a jump pilot to engage in the hard partying behavior that tested both his “moral and practical judgment.” Furthermore, there seems to be little to no “macho” commitment to proving one’s toughness and willingness to take unnecessary risks among BMW riders, as is the case in some edgework communities (Lyng, 1998, p. 2278). Instead there is a strong normative push for safe practices, and new riders are taught the importance of strict focus, a clear yet always active mind, and veteran riders even tone down their risky behavior when their internal focus alerts them to a mismatch between challenge and skill.

Fourth, riders engage in strong processes of redefining risk, and similarities and differences emerge between the ways BMW riders and other edgeworkers retroactively redefine their behavior to make sense of the risks they engage in. In largely similar ways to the search and rescue volunteers, skydivers, and scuba divers studied previously, BMW riders strive to find a personally acceptable level of risk. Following the importance of skill and control, the claims heard from various populations of risk takers in line with “if I wasn’t in control, it wouldn’t make sense to do it” make complete sense. When edgeworkers are faced with evidence supportive of “expert opinions” (Bellaby & Lawrenson, 2001) that counter claims of safety and control individuals must work to reframe these feelings. Lois (2005) adds to Lyng’s (1990) theory of edgework with the “redefining stage” where search and rescue volunteers deny responsibility for victim’s fate, blame the victim, focus only on the positives, and attribute loss to a higher fate in order to transform their feelings so that they could re-engage in risky behavior. Laurendeau (2006) explains how skydivers redefine their emotions “such that the event in
question does not threaten their sense of control” as well as blame the victim and make appeals to fate to “neutralize negative emotions” (p. 600) and come to acceptable understandings of risk. Expanding these practices to a larger audience than the self, Anderson & Taylor (2010) have examined how gun collectors and skydivers utilize some of the strategies of redefining, termed “aligning actions,” discussed above to help distance themselves from negative perceptions from others. BMW riders were found to partake in all of these strategies and more; including blaming the self, attributing loss to fate, denying, redefining, normalizing, accepting risk, while also appealing to higher loyalties in order to redefine the risks they engage in what in Thompson terms the “place of definitions” (1967, p. 345).

Overall, one of the major differences that emerges from the collective findings of this study is the BMW community’s ambivalence towards risk related to identity. While there are undoubtedly varied personal perspectives within the other edgework communities in the literature, it seems that overall there is a high degree of valorization of risk. Skydivers talk often and openly of pulling low and hook turns, bike messengers always break traffic laws, even when they are not working and are in no particular hurry (Kidder, 2006a) and many edgeworkers “intentionally court” risks, even to the level of partaking in illegal substances (Lyng, 1990; Lyng, 1998). In general it appears these edgework communities value “crowding the edge” although it is a policed area of behavior (Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006). Among boaters and raft guides to present yourself as risky is to gain the acclaimed status as “river god or goddess” (Jonas & Holyfield, 2003). However, in the BMW world of sport touring motorcyclists, the presentation of the self as a risky rider does not always so clearly result in positive
impressions. The same tires can be both a boon to one’s status among a dealership or small group of riders, confirmation of tales of successful risky riding at the edge—the edge of one’s tires. For others in the community, who do not value this type of riding, the same tires lead to policing, and rejection of being too dangerous. Within every community of edgeworkers there of course exist personal variations in the amount of risk individuals are willing to take, but the BMW community does seem to extend the application of ambivalence since as a group there seems to be a less overall clear message as to the place of risk. As a whole, riders both cherish and value risk, but also claim the opposite and that they are not overly risky.

In total, these findings all greatly confirm both the nature of situational identities and the social processes of engaging in, defining, and continuing edgework. Simply put, this research is highly illustrative of the symbolic power of definitions in our lives. Neither risk, feelings towards risk, control, nor identity are fixed or static. Individuals and groups are in constant processes of negotiation, both with each other and themselves.
CHAPTER 5: ISSUES OF IDENTITY

The self, then, as a performed character...is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.
Goffman (1959, p. 253)

Introduction

Much of the previous discussion of risk and safety has crucially important implications for the creation and maintenance of identity for riders. Most of the previous findings occur within the in-group; BMW riders displaying culturally significant signs and symbols to other BMW motorcyclists that help to entrench their identity as a serious rider and qualified edgeworker. The ritualized behaviors of rider’s rallies further bind riders together (Austin, 2009). However, riders are also members of the broader society, and under increasing pressure from the non-motorcycling community (Bellaby & Lawrenson, 2001), and they must manage behavior and talk in ways that facilitate mutual interaction and relationships.

As Austin (2009) has pointed out, and was confirmed in my research, BMW motorcyclists make an important distinction between bikers (non-BMWs) and motorcyclists/riders (BMW riders). Consistent with generic in and out-group trends (Tajfel, 1982), BMW riders tend to stereotype non-BMW riders while possessing an overly positive image of their group at the expense of others. However, this research finds that there is very little actual tension between these groups. The riders I spoke with highlight the commonality between all two-wheeled vehicles and praised the BMW community as being quite welcoming to all brands and types, although perhaps not fully understanding. Instead, the tension I discovered lies between BMW riders and the general
public, those that are not aware of the group nuances and are misattributing the
stereotypes of “bikers” to these “motorcyclists.” There are fundamental differences
between these identities to riders, even if the stigma connected to them is rarely acted
upon or the verity of these imagined perceptions is never confirmed.

Since being seen by others as a motorcycle rider can bring both positive and
negative reactions, riders must determine how others see them and behave in ways that
facilitate positive and mitigate negative perceptions of them. Riders must determine
which opinion they might be facing and act accordingly in a series of constant
negotiations. There can be identity rewards and riders engage in some playing to this
identity but when faced with damaging perceptions, BMW riders engage in different
forms of identity work to both distance themselves from the perceived stigma of false
identification and to create a culturally specific identity as a BMW rider. Before
discussing the potential worrisome identities riders try to distance themselves from and
the strategies they employ, I will explore the positive identities and social psychological
benefits riders experience.

Identity Rewards

Riders report a variety of ways that they have benefited via riding or being
identified as a rider. Besides the positives of being identified as an in-group member
among other BMW riders and with the perks of a successful risk taker, BMW riders feel
benefits within the larger community of fellow motorcycle riders regardless of brand or
type. Almost all participants reported enjoying the feeling of belonging that John
describes as “the bond between riders, that no matter where you go, when you see a rider,
no matter what they’re riding, there’s that commonality.” “The wave” is an oft-discussed
component of motorcyclist communication, and is described by Sarah as “the secret motorcycle club handshake.” In her words, the wave—any thing from a small hand gesture, to a finger extended off the clutch-side control, to a full wave, —is like a “high five” that serves to signify recognition of each other and that “you’re cool, I’m cool.” To Mike the wave is a salute saying “keep on riding, you’re not alone.” He reports enjoying the feeling “that we are all on the same team,” a welcome sentiment since sometimes the riding can be lonely. For me the wave is one of the most fun and most interesting parts of sharing my riding-self. As a new rider it was the highlight of many rides; knowing that so many of the people I encountered on the road did not care, or maybe did not even see me, to share a brief albeit fleeting moment with a compatriot was always enjoyed. Mike and I discussed the critical moment we knew we were riders as the first time in our cars our left hand hit the closed window, as we tried to communicate our alliances with fellow riders. At these times it seems critically important that riders are striving to communicate to others riders that they too are a motorcyclist, even when off the bike. Many riders also feel this connection with others motorcyclists while traveling but off the bike via interactions like the ones described by John; “the introductions, gravitating towards each other at a bar, you know, discussing the bikes.” Many feel this connection is stronger with fellow BMW riders, but still present among all types of riders although often in lesser degrees. Many of the riders I spoke with also share riding with family members or significant others and receive much pleasure and shared identities this way.

Identity Rewards Among Non-Riders

Riders also experience social benefits stemming from interactions with other, non-motorcycle riding individuals. Oftentimes this perceived benefit comes not from
specific individuals that riders encounter, but rather a “generalized other” (Mead, 1967) as motorcyclists tap into a varied collection of public perceptions of riders. Initially, motorcycles are the minority on the road and thus are seen as somewhat a spectacle. Second, motorcyclists have also been portrayed with the inescapable image of “the rebelliously sexy biker image that had been popularized in U.S. culture” (Austin, Gagne, & Orend, forthcoming, p. 16). Participants I spoke with describe how they think riding is “fun because it turns heads,” is seen as “sexy,” and that it often serves as a good conversation starter—except for at rallies Mike bemoaned, “since everyone here has a BMW.” Sarah described how she looks forward to the special parking spaces that are reserved at her school for motorcyclists, while getting to pass all her friends in search of a parking spot. Mike and Sarah discuss how they like the reactions they get from others, and illustrate how the simple process of walking from a parked bike, might be a purposeful identity performance:

Sarah: I love when you show up and you’re like “hey…everyone’s looking at you coming into the parking lot,” and it’s fun when you don’t give them any expression, and you just walk off to the side.
Mike: Exactly, yeah, it’s normal you know
Sarah: But sometimes you do it for the reaction.
Mike: True, true.

Mike’s counter of “normal you know” can be seen as attempt to deny the impression management aspects and normalize this act but he conceded the point when Sarah argued that sometimes, walking away from the bike in a calm and expressionless manner is done on purpose, “for the reaction.” It does not appear that riders ride a motorcycle for this reason alone, but those subtle positive reactions do not go unnoticed. Interestingly, it appears that younger riders are more attuned to these positives, whereas
older riders like Mark state, “I’m old enough to not think that it makes me cool anymore” but sees this occurring with his son, who is a passenger and aspiring future rider. Mark sees how his son’s friends “think it’s the coolest thing.” This sentiment, of a stable identity that is implicit and not impacted by being a motorcycle rider was more common among the older participants in this study. Much research counters this claim of permanently fixed identities (Goffman, 1959; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) but there exists little known research that helps to explain the variations I observed within age. Rather than age perhaps, older riders’ increased tenure might explain their lack of stated awareness. With more experience, repeat performances might become routine, unnoticed, and less important in one’s conscious identity kit. Also, these more experienced riders are likely more situated in the community, are less dependant on efforts to present themselves as viable members, and are thus less aware of the nuances of a performance-based identity.

This is not to say that all the adults I spoke with were unaware of how being a rider influence their lives and the images of themselves that they present to others. Even if it does not impact their self-image as they state, riders of all ages perceive that they experience envy from others. Glenn describes:

When I stop at rest stops or anything like that…you can see it in their eyes: *I wish that was me*. It’s mostly dads, the dads that are in the minivans full of kids and you know, they are two days into a road trip thinking: *oh god, I wish that was me*. (Glenn)

Three of the eight males interviewed expressed beliefs that at some level they are aware of the image of motorcycling is desired by the opposite sex. James replied that in his college days “it was a useful tool to have…very positive in that regard,” and laughed.
And while Mike lamented, “it’s not like it’s got me a girlfriend or anything,” this very statement implied that to some degree he hoped or expected that by owning a bike, he would have a better chance to meet women.

For the women I spoke with riding was most beneficial in regards to their experience at the workplace. Lisa likes that sometimes she rides her bike to work because it’s “still enough of a rarity for women to ride that I think for women in the workplace it’s an advantage.” She describes how the “truth of the matter is that we’re just like any other rider out there” but that she benefits from being able to express her identity as a rider and the assumptions of others that she is more motivated and less likely to be pushed around. Two other women I spoke with directly supported these sentiments and reported they loved to share that they ride and felt they received immediate social capital redeemable in the workplace (Bourdieu, 1990). As a schoolteacher, Mary’s experiences riding her motorcycle helped her gain rapport with her students “where they wouldn’t listen to other people, just because I was living what I said” and by demonstrating a “do this” attitude as opposed to a “don’t do this” attitude. Undoubtedly, the romantic images of freedom, rebellion, and the confidence to engage in such risky and typically masculine activities assist these women in a positive portrayal, especially in the workplace, where those types of commonly perceived masculine values are rewarded. This finding resembles Simon’s (2005) observation of how Victorian-era lawyers and mountaineers used their reputations for success in risk-taking, judgment, integrity, and courage on the mountains to garner social capital that was redeemed “at the bar” or in the professional field of risk insurance or investing (p. 208). For the riders just discussed, the simple act of having a helmet and
jacket at the coat rack seems sufficient to earn respect among their peers in typically male-dominated settings.

My own personal reflexive observations are consistent with the foregoing statements of riders as captured in this memo I wrote in the midst (and mist) of analysis:

I was warming the bike up as what looked like a large class of young, well dressed, business majors let out. As these thoughts of positive impressions from others are fresh in my mind I recognize I am more attentive to the reactions of others. I was amazed at the number of glances I received from a mix of both guys and girls, some rather obvious. On a campus where limited eye contact between strangers is the norm and I’m very much not used to being stared at, moments like these stand out easily. I could not help feeling a little boost to my self-esteem. I was sure they were thinking good thoughts, wondering who that was under the helmet, if they could go on a ride, heck- if they could get my number. Like Lisa, I appreciate riding to work and feel some unspoken boost as I walk past my potential students and through the halls among my faculty colleagues fully suited up, helmet in hand, before changing into my “monkey suit” and teaching. (Fieldnotes)

Kyle describes the boost he receives at his workplace where he is the oldest employee by far:

And it’s just part of it, it doesn’t make me feel younger, but a little bitty part of me likes it and…proves to them that getting older don’t mean less fun. Because I’m gonna tell you one thing right now, I’m 54 years old and I can work any of their asses into the ground and I could show them some shit that will scare the living shit out of them. (Kyle)

In this way and others discussed above, riders receive social capital in the form of workplace benefits and general positive impressions made on non-riders. Riders report feeling that others see them as cool, sexy, and free, all images greatly commodified in popular opinion and consumption (Austin, Gagne, & Orend, forthcoming). Among other motorcyclists external to the “tribe” of BMWs, riders also report generally positive feelings of commonality and connection.
Costly Identities

While there are often benefits for individuals from tapping into the popular sentiments of what it means to be a motorcycle rider, there are also potential negative impacts. These are more easily recognized by riders, even by the riders like Glenn who claim to “never spend time ever thinking about what other people are thinking about me.” All the riders I spoke with are greatly aware of the general motorcycle stereotypes and popular images. These public misunderstandings are problematic for riders, as the ideas held by others are incongruent with their perceptions of the self and personal and subcultural definitions. My research revealed BMW riders’ perceptions of two main stereotypical images of bikers; the hell’s angels, bad boy, “1%” type (Quinn, 2001) and a newer, intense risk-taker type.

“The Outlaw”

BMW riders are so familiar with this culturally iconic stereotype, that often when I asked subjects to describe the BMW community or what it means to be a BMW rider, they often did so by comparing themselves or the community to Harley or “outlaw” riders. This in and of itself is not an issue, but becomes problematic when outsiders misidentify riders, which occurs quite often. Mary describes a time when she told someone she rode an R11RS. To a knowledgeable insider, and this is a taxonomy that every early BMW rider learns as evidenced by the curriculum I experienced at “Camp Gears,” a R11RS represents a specific BMW with a boxer-type engine in a sporty body package. To this description Mary received the reply “Yes, but what kind of Harley is that?” Others are very aware of this fact, as illustrated by Kyle’s observation, “When I say I ride I’m sure they immediately think it’s a Harley.”
Austin (2009) discusses how the BMW community seems to reserve special contention for those stereotyped out-group motorcyclists that dress the part of the outlaw biker with leather vests, jackets, and jeans, but ride few miles and pose as true believers. However, he then states, “the true outlaw bikers, or the so-called one-percenter (Quinn 2001), are so few in number and so far removed that they are virtually irrelevant to this group, as this group is to them” (p. 86). This may be true in day-to-day interactions between riders but it appears that on the ideological level this is far from the case. Due to the overall negative connotations the misattribution of identification as a member this biker group carries, BMW riders are highly sensitive to the possibility of being cast in this negative stereotype.

BMW riders largely assume that others perceive of them as fitting with the stereotype of the outlaw biker. Glenn believes that non-riders assume that a motorcycle rider is a “degenerate,” or a “bad person or harmful in some fashion,” and Sarah perceives others as thinking that “all we want to do is make town terrible.” Kyle posits, “if it’s a non-motorcycle riding person, I think they look at me as a hard partying, risk taking, crazy son of a bitch.” Similarly, James is aware that others may be thinking of him as an “unwashed, hairy, leather-clad thug who is going to tear up your town.” Charles supplies this definition of a biker, in sharp contrast to BMW riders; “a biker is somebody who thinks he can do anything he wants, anytime he wants, say anything he wants to anybody he wants to, get anything he wants, anytime he wants.” Most are quite aware that this stereotype is just that, a false assumption, but still worry that they are being judged via these images. As Austin discusses (see 2009, p. 86), drawing from his own experience being turned away from a motel in a fairly rude and curt manner, “It are
these imagined judgments of other’s reactions riders flash to when they experience
the vacancy sign at a motel does not apply to them” (D. M. Austin, personal
communication, April 26, 2010).

My research found little negative action tied to these perceived perceptions and
suggests that this outlaw biker image might be fading. Riders I spoke with have received
some sideways glances, some comments in the vein of “oh, that’s too crazy for me,” but
no one recounts a story like Austin (2009) outlines above. In fact, most answered the
question of “have you ever experienced negative social outcomes?” with “no’s” and
instead supplied accounts of friendly people on the road and strangers going out of their
way to assist stranded motorcyclists. James describes the active advertising of Honda and
their “you meet the best people on a Honda” advertising campaign as part of the reason
he feels the stigma of the outlaw might be less relevant than before (see Austin, Gagne, &
Orend, forthcoming, p. 18). While earlier in his 40-plus year riding career people were
aghast, thinking he “had gone to the dark side,” he now sarcastically reports “that doesn’t
last very long, once you know, you don’t start beating them with a motorcycle chain,” so
“it’s not so bad.” Kyle and Charles, both long-term riders, discuss how the image of
motorcycle riders has improved over the years and offer support that the outlaw based
concerns of non-riders are not commonly acted upon in day to day interactions. Yet the
persona carries on, and riders are sensitive of these images and the possibility of being
treated in accordance with incorrect perceptions.

“The Squid”

Seemingly more troubling to BMW riders is the misidentification with a newer
motorcycle based stigma, one almost all informants describe as the “stupid crotch rocket
rider, that’s riding around in flip flops, sunglasses, and a pair of shorts.” Glenn describes this group as:

…an urban, almost gang sport-bike rider where they are riding very fast, very fast sport bikes, some of these things are basically just street legal track bikes almost, riding them with no protective gear, often doing wheelies, high speed wheelies, and stuff like that. (Glenn)

While none of my interview subjects used the word, in the at-large motorcycle community the term “squid” is often used to describe this type of biker. Like “ATGATT” the exact origin of this word is unknown, but is commonly cited as meaning “Stupidly Quick, Underdressed, Ignorant, and Dangerous” although some finish the phrase with “Imminently Dead.” Further explanations from a user generated encyclopedia site explain that a squid is often young and identified “by their reckless abandon and by their inappropriate attire behavior” and that such behavior “is often looked upon with derision by experienced motorcyclists” (“Squid”, n.d.). This is especially true among BMW riders as this behavior is the essential anti-BMW image and ethos. To ride in this manner, without gear and seemingly out of control as defined by BMW riders is essentially unsafe. Non-motorcyclists have likely seen these images, as they are widely available online, in daredevil-type movies (www.stuntwars.com), and on television shows like Inside Edition and Dateline that feature these lawless stunt riders taunting police and narrowly passing cars on the interstate (Amirstunt, 2008).

I have been called a “squid” once, and this is an extremely upsetting accusation for one who prides themselves as being a safe, conscious, and in-control BMW rider. On one of the various on-line user forums I engage in I was part of a conversation under the “Ride Well” topic about cornering, lean angles, and parts of the motorcycle scraping.
There were a mix of contributions to the thread-style conversation; some bragging and sharing of risky moments of flying sparks from foot pegs and minimal denouncing of this type of behavior. As a relatively newer rider I was unaware of my soon-to-be mistake as I gladly shared recent exploits of leaning so far over that not only foot pegs scraped, but that I had also scuffed some body panels as well. As this same mark had just recently helped me gain entrée among a group of local riders who had interpreted this sign as an indicator of skill and successful edgework I was not expecting the virtual policing (Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006) that followed. The post immediately following mine sharply rebuked this type of riding, called me a squid, and wished me luck on what was left of my riding. As a newer member to the on-line community facing this level of sanctions from a veteran member with a high post count, all I could do was retreat. My actions were not judged as valuable, and instead were quite publicly devalued. The context is extremely important within a situational presentation of one’s edgework and identity, for the same behavior or mark can either be delighted in or damned.

For the non-riders not familiar with the image of the “squid” they seem to most commonly judge riders as being “crazy” as this was the most discussed reaction that subjects have received from others. Kyle has “people essentially tell me that ‘you’re a crazy mother fucker’” and Glenn explains the “looks, the ‘oh you ride…I automatically assume you are a crazy risk taker, or have no regard for your family’.” Lisa is “sure” that people see her as being “reckless and a risk taker” to which she replies “of course I’m not.” This denial is seemingly central to Lisa’s presentation of herself as a safe, responsible rider, and is a type of aligning action discussed below that riders engage in when they face incorrect public assumptions. James explains how he thinks “people are
not nearly as down on motorcycles as they used to be” referring to the outlaw
perception but states that instead, “I think they all think we are all kind of crazy. They see
it as a high-risk activity with skydiving, maybe scuba diving…so “these are a little edgy
people.” It is interesting he brings into the interview the metaphor of the “edge” as I had
not yet introduced this concept during the interview. In this statement he succinctly paints
the picture that the old stigmas are fading and that more important is the misperception of
being an “edgy” person, a persona most BMW riders seem hesitant to accept.

As riders describe the “edgy” and squid stereotype as the perception they fear the
non-riding public believes to me true about themselves, it emerges on the other end of a
strong dichotomous image compared to the outlaw biker. John, describing the two
common stereotypes of motorcycle riders exclaimed with a “bam” as he thrust his hands
in the air, spread far apart, emphasizing the clear cut and distinct image of this “A or B”
assumption. Riders feel left out of this understanding of the biking world, and Mark
explains, “I don’t think we are a part of the equation.” John further explains:

All the general public sees is one of those two…we don’t fit in. Because there are
far fewer of us than those, as far as BMW riders go, we are a huge minority, so
the overall public doesn’t see it. What do they see is that one guy, once a week
somewhere riding in the middle of the night, or through really crappy weather
heading home from a long tour and they think “damn, that guy’s nuts”, but they’re
not thinking, “oh, that’s a BMW rider.” Versus some Harley rider or the young
stupid guy with no gear on screaming through town. (John)

Some are all right with this, stating “invisibility’s not necessarily a bad thing” but
this opinion seems to be the minority and many would appreciate their sense of self to be
in alignment with others’ held opinions of them. John seems to indicate a desire that his
actions, specifically in line with behaviors valued within the BMW community, are seen
as uniquely “BMW” as opposed to being attributed to him being “nuts.” On either side of
the spectrum, outlaw or crazy, riders do not find this to be a comfortable location to situate their identity and engage in specific actions to correct these public misunderstandings.

Aligning Actions

Both of the stereotypes discussed above involve negative perceptions of immature and/or immoral characters. In so far as they are in any way associated in the public eye with these stereotypes, BMW riders often feel it is incumbent upon them to counter these perceptions with more positive and palatable alternatives. In many ways these alternatives strive for “standing out while fitting in” (Anderson & Taylor, 2010, p. 35). BMW riders express wishes to be seen as something unique, different than the popularized dichotomies of motorcycle riders, yet also want to be considered “normal,” not against mainstream culture, and aligned with other motorcyclists. James states “it would be nice to be accepted that you arrive at work, take out your things, and go about being a business person” and John hopes that one day a BMW rider is seen as someone who is safe, who “has taken the precautions and tried to minimize their risks and their injuries by being properly equipped above and beyond.”

However, these targets of desired change do not appear randomly, and when riders are faced with the judgments of others or in anticipation of perceived public misperceptions they engage in a variety of activities referred to as “aligning actions” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976). Building on the work of Anderson & Taylor (2010) I use the concept of “aligning actions” to describe the broadest array of such strategies such as “vocabularies of motive” (Mills 1940) and “accounts” (Scott and Lyman, 1968) that riders engage in to work towards these desired identities. These processes are like the
ones investigated by Jonas and Holyfield (2003) among river guides that “attempt to repair or retrieve their challenged social identities” when called into question (p. 287). These varied interactional strategies breathe life into BMW riders’ social psychological acts of attempting to “maintain alignment or consistency among their individual and social acts, important cultural objects, and their own conceptions of themselves” (Hewitt, 2007, p. 161). Like the skydivers and gun collectors that Anderson and Taylor (2010) investigated, BMW riders engage in both individual and collective aligning actions to counter what they feel are others’ misunderstandings of being “outlaws” or “squids.”

**IndividualAligningActions**

One of the ways riders work to align these misperceptions is to try to mitigate the possibility of even being misidentified in the first place. Anderson and Taylor (2010) state that serious leisure participants “do not necessarily need to discuss one’s serious leisure identity with nonpeers” but their discussion of “completely closeted” skydivers and gun collectors is limited, suggestive that the desire for social recognition seems to necessitate the need for aligning actions as they work to build rapport with outsiders (pp. 47-48). In contrast, I found some participants were quite all right with downplaying their riding self to outsiders, as Mark states, “invisibility’s not necessarily a bad thing.” Mike states that at work, “except for my friends, I’m not going to bring it up” and Sarah “used to not talk about it at school at all.” She would store her helmet in the principal’s office since it did not fit in her locker and after changing “would go about my normal day.” Claiming that riding is normal, as discussed shortly, was one of the strategies that emerged as an aligning action, and Sarah’s claim of being normal by not sharing her riding self is often countered by other riders with claims that riding is normal.
riders elect to not bring up the fact they ride, but will happily discuss riding a
motorcycle with insiders and outsiders alike once the topic is introduced. Riders discuss
how BMW riders “aren’t advertizing it,” like other tribes of motorcyclists with clothing
lines, tattoos, and belt buckles yet also recognize that in subtle and culturally nuanced
ways BMW riders do show off. However, many of these displays of membership are
designed to appeal to other insiders only and it seems common that most non-peers could
walk past a BMW rider off the bike unnoticed.

Riding boots, typically leather, over the ankle and often armored is a key piece of
the cultural uniform (Austin & Gagne, 2008, p. 432) and boots often seem to be the
telltale sign of a BMW touring motorcyclist when away from their bike. This excerpt
from field notes of my first rally spoke to the opening Friday night scene and how to an
outsider member, one might have a hard time telling this was a motorcycle event:

Boots, boots, and boots. Shorts, jeans, riding gear, you name it, riders are
wearing boots while walking around the campsite. Functionally, boots
serve as waterproof footwear great for stomping around a wet
campground, make packing easier, but also have to serve as some sort of
statement. Here, it is fashionable to wear zip-off nylon pants and knee
high black boots, definitely not cool in any other setting. Here, it could be
an easy way to identify yourself as a serious rider when still just wearing
shorts and a t-shirt? Away from the bike it might be harder to tell if you
are serious. To the other campers driving by I bet we look like a group of
boot aficionados that happen to have bikes nearby to help explain our
weird fashion. Save for a few other indicators, t-shirts from rally’s,
dealerships, and a few classic BMW roundels on clothing items, the
crowd of people in no way fits with a “motorcycle rally.” (Fieldnotes)

My girlfriend, who only a few months ago swore she had never seen a BMW bike
or rider, now can pick a BMW out of a parking lot, across a crowded highway, or can
spot a likely BMW rider in the grocery store. Clued into the subtle signs, she is able to
spot riders that before had previously passed unseen. To the dismay of the staff at the
Bureau of Motor Vehicles, they had to restart all my registration paperwork when they exclaimed, “I didn’t even know BMW made motorcycles!” In ways it appears many do not share their status as BMW riders and could be rather successful in hiding it if they desired to do so.

**Disclaimers**

While some riders may attempt to avoid sharing the fact that they ride a motorcycle to minimize incurring potentially damaging repercussions this is not always possible or desired. Some riders are forced to be visible, or choose to be for a variety of reasons. These riders, either in the face of disapproval from others or suspecting the loaded “Oh you ride? That’s so dangerous,” engage in the interactional tactic referred to as a “disclaimer.” While Hewitt and Stokes (1975) describe a disclaimer as behavior “employed by actors faced with upcoming events or acts which threaten to disrupt emergent meanings” it appears that disclaimers among BMW riders occur both before negative impressions are shared as well as after. All of the riders I spoke with describe conversations where they utilize a form of a disclaimer or used disclaimers to describe how they feel about the risk they engage in and what other people in their lives think of their riding. Nearly every conversation I witnessed and partook in over the course of data collection contained disclaimers as riders worked to present an acceptable image of the self to either peers or outsiders. It appears that riders do not make efforts to distinguish which of the problematic stereotypes they are being judged as belong to and engage in behaviors that are largely the same either way.
Carving out a new niche.

One type of disclaimers observed within the BMW community of touring motorcyclists can be described as “credentialing” efforts (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975, pp. 4-5). Anderson and Taylor describe that skydivers “endeavored to provide their credentials as rational, risk-averse individuals in an effort to avoid being viewed as risk-taking daredevils” (2010, p. 48). Riders do this as well, and it appears that many are trying to create a specific credential of a “BMW rider” as someone who is rational, safe, risk-averse, and serious. “Serious” was used 21 times in my interviews in various descriptions of BMW riders, the BMW culture, and what makes BMW’s unique. In this way, their credentialing efforts takes the form of educational discussions as they try to correct misperceptions and carve out a new niche for themselves.

Oftentimes the disclaimers of safety and rational behavior are presented within the framework of what it means to be a BMW rider. “But I ride a BMW” was an oft heard phrase, as riders worked to credential themselves as something different and something safe. Mike explains, “Some people feel the need to explain it’s not a chopper, it’s not a Harley, it’s a BMW” as they work to “turn down stereotypes.” Mike further explains that he doesn’t try to “tear down all bike stereotypes, it’s just that I’m trying to make sure they don’t apply to me.” Instead of just working to distance himself from the incorrect stereotypes he attempts to educate others of his credentials and safety practices that are often tied to his ideas of what it means to be a BMW rider. He does this in part because the incorrect assumptions “just don’t apply” and states that if he leaves a conversation with a non-rider saying “ah, I now have a new stereotype of BMW riders…I could live with that.”
The identity of a BMW rider that riders are working to create in the minds of others is often presented as opposed to the “other.” Mike, in an effort to “turn down stereotypes” will often share that BMW riders are:

not your stereotypical biker- especially since most of us are the ones here, are the ones that enjoy the long trips, are careful, and think ahead. You know- are professionals that like to ride…the ones who can really self-motivate. (Mike)

Within quotes like this are a variety of rich claims; of difference, long and careful riding, an appreciation of riding, being professional, and self motivated. All of these ideas distance riders from potentially damaging impressions while supplanting those ideas with positive impressions of what it means to be a BMW rider. Mary discusses how in part she is quick to draw lines between the different groups of motorcycle riders but recognizes “it might be just a defense against the general culture being so anti-bike—you know, like but I’m not like them.” She shares how she struggles with this strategy though, as she hates herself for sounding so superior just because she rides a BMW. She laughs at herself for doing it, and goes on to explain that even with an understanding of similarity between herself and other motorcyclists, she still feels the need to be defensive.

Mike utilizes the disclaimer of “it’s a BMW” not in anticipation of incorrect attributions, which is suggestive of a need for a reconceptualization of the ordered definition of Hewitt and Stokes (1975) original disclaimers. Mike jokingly describes that he doesn’t say, “Hi my name is Mike and I’m not a BMW rider” but instead waits until people ask if he has a BMW, does wheelies, or is part of a gang before he shares that he “rides a BMW” and works to educate individuals as to what that means. Kyle, rather than being slow to bring up being a motorcycle rider, specifically says “I ride a BMW” early
on and “absolutely” works to correct the incorrect pictures of himself that others are holding. While he states, “it really doesn’t matter to me” he also just “wants to set the record straight you know?” For Lisa, she might not claim the identity of a “BMW rider” as part of her disclaimers, but still utilizes a strategy of differencing herself from others riders as an attempt to educate non-riders. She states that she explains her behavior “less often through what brand I’m riding, unless someone asks, but I’m more likely to say I wear a helmet, I wear full riding gear, I’m not one of those people.” She does this largely to “put them at ease” and arguably to “build rapport and facilitate mutual understanding with outsiders” (Anderson & Taylor, 2010, p. 48). Through disclaimers attempting to “credential” themselves away from suspect identities of risk takers or outlaws, BMW riders largely work to create an alternative motorcycling identity, that of a BMW rider. Through these small interactions it appears riders strive to re-educate the non-riding public of the practices they engage in that are seen as specifically “BMW” while also distancing themselves from other “biker” stereotypes.

Claims of authenticity.

Riders also make claims in an effort to reach a shared understanding with non-riders and avoid the stigma attached to risk takers or outlaws. These claims fall along two main strategic lines, claiming that they are like everyone else and through claims of authenticity and regular use. Less often seen are general claims like “I am normal, I am like you” although this emerged as a strategy used by riders to distance themselves from biker stereotypes and align themselves with those that may be likely to judge them. Mary states that if an outsider were to look around the national MOA rally “there’s grandparents, and kids with college on their mind, and pretty much we’re more of a
general culture than most people are willing to give us credit for.” This is also seen among gun collectors, who in an attempt to establish their personal respectability, frame their collections through a lens of historical worth, while quickly adding “but I’m not a freak…” (Anderson & Taylor, 2010, p. 49).

The main way that riders work to claim that riding is normal is through accounts of their regular and frequent use of the bike. BMW riders pride themselves on not being fair weather riders and repeatedly subjects used the phrase “they ride” to describe what makes BMW riders unique. When riders use this disclaimer in interactions with others it often appears in a three step process; first distancing themselves from others and then working to educate non-riders on the correct ethos of the BMW community. First, through the idea of “they ride,” riders works to distance themselves from other types of bikers that BMW riders perceive to be about show, pretending, or “posing” (Austin, 2009, 85). Mark describes, “There are a bunch of people that are simply there for the show…they have the metric cruisers, or the Harleys or whatever that are all dressed up, and they’re there for show.” This of course is one of the images likely drawn upon as outsiders picture most motorcyclists. Secondly, after presenting what other riders are like, many BMW riders will specifically denounce this type of “false” presentation of the self and claim authenticity with expressions like the one made by Kyle: “It ain’t nothing about image, it ain’t. So much about our lives are about image, how do we appear to everyone that’s looking at us, and all that horseshit, it’s about the ride.”

Lastly, after stating that they do not use the bike “for show” BMW riders instead work to claim authenticity through the use of the bike as regular transportation. Claims of being serious, discussed above, also appear here as riders work to authenticate their
engagement in riding. Commuting, especially year-round, is a source of pride for many BMW riders. Common descriptions of the BMW community expressed by many subjects were that “BMW riders are more likely to use their bike day in and day out for basic transportation.” To others, BMW riders will work to show that for them, riding is as much a routine part of their life as driving is to so many. Mike describes:

I guess that I’m a commuter/tourer, basically it replaces a car once the weather’s bad unless I absolutely need or maybe I need to haul some stuff or need to take a group of people then I take the car. But everything else, the bike- I just want it to be a normal part of my life, it’s not a matter of “oh a bike is cool.” It’s more “it just is.” (Mike)

Since he does not view his riding as ever about show, Jake sees the need for hiding the fact he riders to be irrelevant, and often impossible. To him, those negative connotations “do not apply, like I said, its my mode of transportation and so I’m always in my gear.” Many riders refer to their bike as transportation or serving utilitarian purposes, which is a direct counter to the images of lawless and counterculture outlaws. What better way to remove yourself from the scenes of tearing about main street, drunk, wreaking havoc, than to use your bike, and make your riding about getting to and from work? Mark specifically pictures that others are seeing him as the “kinda the outlaw mentality, and I don’t really share that, cause to me the bike is transportation.” If a bike serves a functional purpose, which many BMW riders strive to define as the case since Glenn states that BMW riders “ride with a purpose,” it also provides evidence to counter others’ attributions of the damaging identity of irresponsible thrill seekers.

Techniques of Neutralization

BMW motorcycle riders also engage in techniques of neutralization as an interactional strategy of alignment (Sykes & Matza, 1957). These strategies seem largely
focused on countering images of the overly risky and irresponsible rider as opposed to the outlaw image. As discussed in the chapter above, riders engage in techniques of neutralization as they struggle to find a personally acceptable balance of risk. In order to make sense of the risks they put themselves in, riders were found to appeal to higher loyalties of cultural values and use a loose application of a “defense of necessity” (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003). While riders are not forced to ride in ways like the criminal that is pushed to crime, they often claim that they virtually have no other choice than to ride (2003, p. 545) in order to answer the romantic ethos of self-fulfilling lifestyles. Techniques of neutralization appear to be occurring as internal processes and as “impression management strategies, serving as aligning actions to justify potentially problematic identities and behaviors” (Anderson & Taylor, 2010, p. 49). Besides riders sharing their beliefs of higher loyalties and defending the necessity of riding they also invoked “condemning the condemners” and a “denial of injury” in interactions with outsiders and in descriptions of how others in their lives feel about riding.

Cromwell and Thurman (2003) describe that denial of injury “allows the offender to perceive of his or her behavior as having no direct harmful consequences to the victim” (543). In this sense, riders often attempt to frame their risk taking behavior as having no consequences to the victim—other users of roadways. Most accidents involving cars and bikes are argued to only be dangerous to bikers and riders cite that most accidents are based on rider error. Riders argue, “If I get in an accident, no one else but me is going to get hurt” and this is a claim that I have made numerous times as I have discussed my ‘overly risky’ actions with others. In rejection of “expert” opinions, motorcycle riders have also been found to say that “motorcycling in not a risky activity
per se, the risks involved in motorcycling are in large part imposed from outside, for example, by car drivers and other road users” (Bellaby & Lawrenson, 2001, p. 375). While placing one’s self in harms way is still a somewhat problematic identity in such a risk-aversive society (Lupton, 2002) riders claim that they are at least only potentially hurting themselves.

In order to further protect their identity and present their risk taking as socially acceptable riders invoke “condemning the condemners.” Rather than stating the “system is corrupt” (Cromwell & Thurman, 2003, p. 544) riders make claims that “if it were not for cars on the road, what I do would be perfectly safe.” Riders are aware that their biggest risk, and least controllable threats are from other drivers, and inform non-riders that the failure of car drivers to detect and recognize motorcycles is the leading cause of motorcycle accidents (“The Hurt Report”). This helps riders shift the attention to other motorists, sometimes referred to as “cagers,” which relieves some of the negative pressure on them for being overly risky.

In addition to condemning other drivers and denying the existence of potential victims riders also work to neutralize the notions of danger by referring to the objective strategies of safety. Doing this—referring to ATGATT, the value of riding skills, education, cultural values of safety, and conspicuousness, spans both categories of individual aligning actions. In their rejection of claims of engaging in overly risky activity riders have also been found to say that the risks can be overcome by “road craft,” a term employed by Bellaby and Lawrenson (2001, p. 385). Since these behaviors, as discussed in the previous chapter, are so central to what riders do and how they feel
comfortable engaging in their edgework it fits that they play such a critical role in how they explain their behaviors to others.

Collective Aligning Actions

While most BMW riders tend to prefer to ride solo, BMW riders have been found to be a community of leisure users with a “strong collective identity” (Austin & Gagne, 2008, p. 417). BMW riders can be tied to collective membership loosely, through formally joining their local club, and nearly all of the riders I spoke with were affiliated with the national BMW Motorcycle Owners Association (MOA), the country’s largest group of BMW riders. Participating in local rallies and the large MOA rally are members easiest opportunities to interact with fellow members, although there are clearly some riders who do not partake in these large collective events. Working together, often in loosely connected ways, BMW riders also engaged in collective aligning actions.

The BMW riders I spoke with do not seem to often engage in what Anderson and Taylor (2010) describe as “affiliation with popular social causes.” One rider, Charles, is highly involved in ABATE, the “Alliance of Bikes Aimed Towards Education” which is a group dedicated to motorcycle rights through political change, charitable works, and public education (www.abatepa.org). None of the riders I spoke with participate in events like organized charity rides or poker runs that are popular in some motorcycling circles. At the MOA rally there were a few charity fundraisers, but working to generate good press did not emerge as a main goal or activity of the event. In organizing a rally, the MOA often needs to “convince local officials that our rallies are not “biker” events in help ease their concerns” (D. M. Austin, personal communication, April 26, 2010). There are a few ads for charities within the MOA publication—the Owners News (ON), but
again, these activities are limited within the community and are often not specifically BMW events. Instead, “dramaturgical stereotype busting,” the “staged or dramatized performance designed to counter negative stereotypes or public concerns” was found to be the most prevalent form of collective aligning actions within the BMW community (Anderson & Taylor, 2010, p. 52). Confirming of their earlier work, since most of the current beliefs about motorcycling focus on the danger, the “stereotype-busting displays and performances [I] observed were explicitly directed towards highlighting safety issues” (p. 52).

With this as a lens, the cultural norm of safety that has been discussed previously in this research emerges as the most widespread form of dramaturgical stereotype busting. This is not to say that enforcing community norms of safety are actions done only for show, but these individual actions and policing of others has a large collective power. Wearing “All The Gear, All The Time” is now seen not only a personal strategy for safety, nor a ticket to community membership, but also as a performance to non-riders, a visual disclaimer and technique of neutralization. To be the only rider in the motorcycle parking row wearing a helmet, pants, jacket, gloves, and boots in the summer heat sends strong messages to those observant others; “I am not like the others and I take my safety seriously.” Add the modulating headlights, flashing brake lights, and neon reflexive vests with a giant BMW roundel that are common in the community of BMW tourers and one becomes visible in more than one way. Without having to engage in conversations but by adhering to community norms, a single rider through individual action is helping carve out a new understanding of BMW riders. I have felt a bit silly sometimes in my colorful gear, selected for function over fashion that as John describes
is “rather clown-like.” Austin (2009) describes BMW protective clothing as “a type of anti-fashion fashion statement” (p. 85). This research confirms this, but suggests that this public display does more than helping to “delineate the boundaries of the tribe” (p. 85). Something as “simple” as clothing choices within this community help serve individual and group identities, entrench one as a successful edgeworker, while helping to keep individuals physically safe and mentally secure in their choices while also working to create more accurate and positive public impressions of BMW motorcycle riders.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this chapter I have discussed varied components within the socially situated identity of being a BMW rider. Much of this conversation focused on dealings with the out-group, non-BMW riders, as much of the previous chapter deals exclusively with in-group identity. Riders perceive that they are the recipients of social rewards for being identified as a rider and this occurs between non-BMW riding motorcyclist and the non-riding public. However, being seen as a rider can be a costly identity and many riders believe that they are being incorrectly viewed by outsiders as either “outlaws” or “squids.” Following this concern, BMW riders engage in a variety of aligning actions to distance themselves from these potentially damaging attributions while working to correct the views of them held by others.

While a considerable body of literature exists on edgework subcultural practices, as discussed in the previous chapter, far less scholarly work has examined the topics of “morally controversial leisure” (Olmsted, 1988) within the edgework framework. But as this chapter illustrates, as Anderson & Taylor (2010) have suggested, these issues loom larger than typically recognized. One of the criticisms leveled against studies of
edgework is the inattention to class, race/ethnicity, and gender (Miller, 1991). This research knowingly investigates a subcultural world known to be predominantly white, male, and middle-class, and in those regards, fails to answer the call put forth by Miller to expand the theory’s application. Examining Goffman’s (1963) one “unblushing male”—“a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good completion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports” (p. 128), one might wonder if “and they ride a BMW” should be added.

However, what makes findings from this research valuable is that even among a seemingly “unblushing” population we see basic and universal processes of social psychological reactions to stereotypes with negative implications. Most studies involving impression management are of problematic identities that have reached the spoiled state of stigma (Goffman, 1963), and are studied in the realm of criminal behavior (Sykes & Matza, 1957), the mentally ill (Goffman, 1963, 1961a), potential drug users (Monagham, 2001) or others more easily recognized as deviant. However, impression management occurs across all levels of society as individuals engage in “carefully designed presentation of self so as to create a certain impression that fits our goals or needs in a social interaction” (Aronson et al., 2002, p. 166). This research thus serves to “normalize” these behaviors, de-centers struggles of identity as being only among “problem populations,” and suggests these issues are common in all walks of life. It would seem that among any group of people—whether it be among those who engage in a specific type of leisure, an ethnic group, or occupational setting—there are processes of rejecting spoiled identifications while working to build correct understandings among outsiders.
This finding has powerful implications in regards to the potential for social change and tolerance building. Within this group, and other seemingly “unblushing” groups it may often difficult to raise a critical mass of caring as individuals may falter in empathically relating to other groups of individuals. However, if processes of subcultural struggles for applicable identification are seen as more universal therein lays a critical connection available to tap into. A white, middle class, heterosexual male may see no relevance with the problematic dichotomies of gender, sex, and sexuality. That is, until the connection is made between this and his struggles of being forced to fit into one of two popular images of what it means to be a motorcyclist. “But I ride a BMW” he says, resisting being falsely labeled an “outlaw” or a “squid.” So to, do the boxes “M” or “F” leave out some crucial nuances. Once this parallel is made, possible with any individual with a subgroup identity, it would seem the ensuing conversation holds more potential for change.

Furthermore, this research helps to illuminate some of the basic functions of in and out-group behaviors, building off the work of Austin & Gagne (2008) that discusses how in/out-group boundaries help to build the cohesion of the BMW community. By engaging in individual and collective aligning actions the subcultural group as a whole is working to define out-group members as different, thus building unity and cohesion among the in-group. This research also illustrates the dangerous “long arm of stereotypes.” Popular and persistent images even thought found to be “irrelevant” (Austin, 2009, p. 86), still carry immense symbolic weight. While I found riders to be largely aware of the false nature of these beliefs, they still are worried that others may feel this way about them. What thus becomes irrelevant are if these perceived judgments
are actually true. Invoking the essential Thomas Theorem (Thomas & Thomas, 1928):
if riders believe these negative perceptions are real, they are real in their consequences
and riders will thus behave in ways to counter these false beliefs. This pattern of behavior
is universal, applicable to any situation, and likely found among all presentations of
identity.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In this research I sought to highlight the intersections of edgework and identity among a group of BMW motorcycle riders. Focusing on sport-touring riders I desired to extend Lyng’s (1990) concept of edgework, introduce motorcycle touring to the list of edgework activities, and further the conversations of risk taking behavior and identity. I entered the field with a general sense of the relevant literature reviewed above and a loose interview guide to help structure my data collection. I spoke with a range of participants about the subculture of BMW riders, their impressions of positive and negative social consequences, and their thoughts on risk. As a participant in the setting I strove to be reflexive and critical of conversations and behaviors other riders and I engaged in. During this period of data collection and concurrent analysis it was clear the central theme was risk, and more importantly, risk framed through rider’s discourse of safety and control. At this phase of the study I also discovered new research that provided a wonderfully rich description of the BMW group gatherings, or rallies, and many of the components of what constitutes this mobile community (Austin, 2008; Austin & Gagne, 2009). Less concerned with the need to introduce general aspects of the BMW community I turned a critical eye to the conversations and behaviors central to risk and rider’s impressions of identity.

The first chapter of findings focus on these themes, with special attention paid to practices and beliefs within the community of BMW sport-touring riders. Safety was found to be immensely important for these riders, a common theme in much of the edgework literature, as individuals strive for control over the uncontrollable in an attempt to stay safe at the edge (Lyng, 1990). I found a corpus of everyday safety practices of the
BMW motorcycle riders I studied; the objective things riders do to maintain safety and control. While many of these practices might be conducted with safety in mind, they all serve as important aspects to riders’ identities of serious riders and successful edgeworkers within the group as well. Safety emerged not only as a strong goal for the individuals I spoke with but as a central component to what it means to be a BMW rider. There certainly appears to be a strong cultural ethos of safety among BMW motorcyclists in this study that might distinguish them from edgeworkers previously studied. Riders were found to enforce group norms of safe practices especially those related to wearing “All The Gear All The Time.” Owning a BMW is more than a ticket to cultural membership but was also found to be key to riders claims of safety. Through dedicated maintenance, advanced braking technology, and “farkles” riders believe they are able to maintain control. Riders recognize that one of the most dangerous aspects, other drivers, is beyond their control, and instead strive to control what they can and emphasize the importance of being conspicuous and paying attention. While these practices are essential to rider’s daily actions the subjective interpretations of these objective strategies I suggest is more important.

All the riders I spoke with, and likely all edgeworkers, strive for an appropriate balance between risk and control. Too much safety and riders do not approach the edge. However, heart-rate-rising situations must be seen as being under control to be pleasurable. I discuss what riders experience when they are successful in controlling the balance and these conversations largely mirror previous research on flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), the ineffable nature of edgework (Lyng, 1990), and “being in the zone.” However, all the riders in this study have either crossed over the boundary of
control or anticipate doing so. In an effort to successfully navigate this “place of definitions” (Thompson, 1967, p. 345) riders were found to engage in a myriad of practices to redefine their edgework as positive and frame themselves as still in control. Riders blame the self for loss of control, which makes the boundary transgression easier to cope with and correct. Riders also deny the existence of risk, stating they can control the uncontrollable and present their making it out of the risky situation as proof that they possess the “right stuff” (Laurendeau, 2006, p. 592). Riders further work to redefine their fear, and use their worry as a strategy to increase their intense focus—one of the key objective strategies I present above. In an effort to define their edgework as morally acceptable riders also attempt to normalize the risks of riding, where individuals state that the chances of dying on the bike are just as good as in the rest of their lives. While riders actively work to avoid risk, they also largely accept it, and treat crashing as inevitable, illustrative of the ambivalence wrapped up in risk (Donnelly, 2004; Natalier, 2002). Riders were also found to appeal to higher loyalties to find a personally acceptable understanding of their behavior, citing luck, fate, and the importance of “romantic pursuit of self-fulfillment” (Anderson & Taylor, 2010). I concluded this chapter with a discussion of how these findings support and extend the body of edgework literature. In this comparison of the major themes of safety, a discourse of skill, awareness, and redefining risk I weave BMW motorcyclists into the larger body of edgework. Furthermore, I am able to highlight the extensions of edgework theory and deepen an understanding of how individuals strive for control and make sense of the risks they take.

Secondly, this research yields interesting findings central to the identity dynamics between the BMW riders I studied and the broader society. I was particularly interested
in how riders perceive others as viewing them, since these believed perceptions are
often riders’ lived realities. I found riders to be the recipients of both positive and
negative social consequences due to their status as a motorcycle rider. Often riders were
concerned about the negative implications of what it means to be a motorcycle rider for
the broader population of non-riders. The riders I spoke with believe that they are being
falsely seen as either “outlaws” or “squids,” both of which are highly problematic
identities for the individuals because they go against many of their own notions of what it
means to be a BMW rider. I found that when faced with these negative stereotypes riders
engage in individual and collective “aligning actions” to repair or redefine their
potentially damaged identity. Riders hide their riding-self, utilize disclaimers to either
carve out a new subcultural niche or claim authenticity, or engage in techniques of
neutralization—defending the necessity of being a rider to their sense of self,
condemning the condemners, and denying injury. I also found riders to engage in
collective actions that consist of aligning with popular social causes and dramaturgical
stereotype busting (Anderson & Taylor, 2010). The findings from this chapter illustrate a
social psychological understanding of identity and enrich the discussion of impression
management of problematic identities.

While in some ways this work suffers from a narrow lens—investigating a
population of edgeworkers that is mainly male, white, and middle class (Miller, 1991), it
examines processes across the experience spectrum (Donnelly, 2006), broadens the range
of activities studied as edgework, and looks at an older demographic than most of the
previously studied edgeworkers. In fact, the findings from this research directly counters
ideas that “young adults are good candidates for edgework since they are particularly
susceptible” to the illusion of control and thus, “edgework is more common among young people than among older people” (Lyng, 1990, p. 872).

This research could be further criticized on its small sample size and lack of generalizability, common claims levied against in-depth qualitative work. While these points I may concede, I argue that only through this deep and contextualized investigation was I able to uncover the nuanced practices and beliefs of these BMW motorcycle riders. I do acknowledge that this research examines questions of risk, control, and identity among a specific, yet broadly defined, subset of the larger BMW community. While I often refer to “BMW motorcyclists” I more accurately can speak to findings that may at most extend to “BMW sport-touring motorcyclists.” This is an important distinction to make, as the risks, safety strategies, and perceptions of riders might differ greatly when talking to motorcyclists that prefer the track or trail. Future research should investigate these themes across a broader sample of types of riders, a strategy I chose to ignore given time considerations of this research. Furthermore, in an effort to help ease the barriers (suggested to exist in perception only) between different types of motorcyclists, researchers should work to erase these boundaries by investigating the motorcycling community at large. It is predicted that many of the findings from this study would largely translate to other segments of the motorcycling market, although the differences would speak volumes to the subtle differences between groups.

Another limitation to this research is the failure to learn about my participants beyond the topics of immediate interest. So captivated by stories of near misses and impression management I often failed to collect basic background information that might have proved useful in connecting these individuals with larger trends of edgework. Lyng
discusses how edgework is most common among those in highly alienating work such as factory or other blue-collar employment (1990, p. 876). My sense of the data tempts me to counter this conclusion. However, I am unable to definitively make any strong claims. Further, there is often an “addictive character” to edgework (Lyng & Snow, 1986, p. 173) and I am unable to analyze if these riders engage in other edgework-type pursuits in an attempt to find control and identity outside of their increasingly rational lives. However, there are hints of this as Mark stated in regard to the connection between his motorcycle riding and love of flying; “I’m sure there’s something there” and many riders invoke other activities like climbing and scuba diving to help explain the feelings of riding. As riders view their limitations as promises for future control, future research should investigate the seduction of the edge within individuals across various activities to further illustrate the addictive nature of the edge.

While I argue in the methods chapter how my insider status and situation within the community as a complete member researcher enhances my entrée and ability to gain insights otherwise missed, my insider status might have blinded me to certain assumptions. As a rider who will continue to ride after the completion of this project I undoubtedly feel some need to frame riders’ search for control as rational and moral. My own biases and interests likely led me down certain paths of analysis, although the fact I began this project with only general topics of inquiry help to alleviate this criticism. Working closely with a non-rider but fellow edgeworker helped me stay sensitive to reporting the findings and not simply telling a story I wanted to. Further, this research benefits from the use of analytic autoethnography and I strive to make my own opinions and experiences transparent within the texts of this report. While I may have missed
topics of analysis, and the data contains themes in need of further investigation, I still have reported on a new group within the world of edgework as serious leisure. By comparing my findings to other similar research I extend further understandings of the largely similar yet nuanced practices of edgework, understanding risk, and identity construction.

One of the major themes left unexplored in this research is the group’s likely changing nature of aligning actions. With the international launch of the BMW’s new S100RR super-sport bike, BMW is doing much to purposefully change the demographic make-up of the BMW community. BMW has never had a bike designed to appeal to the race crowd or the “shorts, flip-flop, and no helmet” riders and while there will certainly be a large and varied draw to the “RR” it will undoubtedly attract new types of riders to the BMW marquee. These individuals who perhaps would never have considered a BMW might now adopt the brand, but perhaps not the ethos of the group. Frank already acknowledges there being whole “new crowds and types of people” at the dealership, and this new type of rider might pose problems for the riders like that ones studied in this research. The phrase but I ride a BMW might lose its relevance, as the once seemingly “universal” group assumptions of “ATGATT” are eroded by a shifting demographic of riders. The BMW community faces similar challenges as a group that has an increasing age, and limited prospect for new members. My time in the field revealed group-wide struggles as members indicated concerns of shrinking populations and the loss of members. These issues are certainly not unique to this group of leisure enthusiasts. Nation-wide trends of increasing age demographics points to many potential changes in the broader society and those involved both in the selling of and enjoyment of recreation
would do well to be thinking critically about what these shifts mean to their businesses, organizations, and pastimes.

While this research is most likely important and intriguing to edgework scholars it offers much to those generally interested in risk and social interactionist concepts of identity. While the strategies of control, subjective techniques of redefining risk, and aligning actions uncovered in this research are specific to the subset of the BMW community studied in this research, this research presents implications that are universal in nature. All members of society interact with risk, especially in a world where risks are shifting from institutional to individual domains and there is a call for “embracing risk” (Baker & Simon, 2002). While it might not involve nearly scraping one’s toe on the inside of a corner, members of the boarder society make financial investments, gamble on relationships, and make tough career choices. Furthermore, all individuals engage in sense making processes to retroactively understand their behaviors, especially those related to risk. Lastly, all citizens of the world belong to smaller group divisions, whether they be by nation, or within a society through occupation, religious allegiance, racial or gender identification, or the seemingly innocuous types of leisure that individuals enjoy. All groups engage in similar processes of valuing traits within the group, drawing boundary lines between themselves and others, and devaluing traits external to the group (Tajfel, 1982). There exist many public conceptions, and often misconceptions, of the various groups that constitute the make up of our society. Members within these varied groups face potentially damaging perceptions of others and engage in processes of aligning these perceptions with their sense of self.
All together, these implications speak volumes to the importance of understanding the symbolic and contextual nature of social life. Neither an understanding of risk or notions of the self are static and fixed. One individual’s notion of what constitutes a risk worth taking differs across time and space, as does one group’s definitions of risk. Thus, “risk,” like notions of the self and identity, should be viewed as a symbol, an idea in constant negotiation and renegotiation. By appreciating the symbolic nature of risk we can better understand its impact on understanding social status (Sauder, 2005), and risks’ “profound impact on our formed responses” (Smith & Bugni, 2006, p. 144). With these understandings the concept “farkle or die” becomes meaningful. On one level, to “farkle” is to engage in an objective strategy to reduce the risks of motorcycle riding. Through “functional sparkles” riders might help to reduce the pressures of wind but also reduce the internal pressures to stop engaging in such risky activities. A “farkle” also saves individuals from a symbolic identity “death” as these bike modifications are cultural signals of membership, ones’ dedication to riding and skills. Lastly, as BMW riders strive for more accurate perceptions to individuals outside of the community, to “farkle” is to “stand out while fitting in” (Anderson & Taylor, 2010) and to help prevent communal symbolic identity “death.”

While Natalier (2002) is correct in finding that motorcycle riders are ambivalent towards risk it appears that this symbolic understanding of risk offers a more complete look than the binary nature often assumed within an ambivalent attitude. There is more than just a repulsion and attraction to risk. If we desire to understand edgework, we need to understand the social contexts, group attitudes, broader perceptions, motivations,
sensations, and feelings of control that are arguably inherently tied to the processes of engaging in risky behavior.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Tell me a little about your bike(s) and how you got into riding.
- Describe your riding history/style.
- Why do you ride?
- How would you define BMW riders?
- Are BMW riders different than other riders? If so, how?
- How do you feel when you tell someone who is not a rider that you ride a BMW?
  - If necessary: How does that change when that person rides, but not BMW’s?
  - If necessary: How does that change when the other person is a BMW rider?
- If there are, describe times where you downplay being a rider?
  Further prompt: Are there people you don’t talk about it with?
- Tell me about times you’ve ever felt like there were negative social consequences for being a rider.
  Further prompt: Are there times you look forward to sharing/showing that you are a rider?
- What are some common stereotypes that you know about for motorcycle riders?
- What are some common stereotypes that you know about of BMW motorcycle riders?
- Tell me about times where you felt like there were positive social outcomes for being a rider.
- Describe moments you’ve had where you feel just on the edge. (When is it, how does it feel?)
- Is it part of why you ride?
- Describe the riskier moments you’ve had while riding.
- How do you feel about the risk that accompanies being a motorcycle rider?
- What do you do specifically to help try to minimize the risks?
- Is the risk controllable?