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- 1 Experiences leading elite motorcycle road racers to participate at the Isle of Man Tourist
- 2 Trophy (TT): An existential perspective

3 Abstract

4 The Isle of Man Tourist Trophy (TT) is one of the deadliest and most controversial sporting
5 events in the world, with more than 250 fatalities on the course over its 112-year history.
6 Competitors race motorcycles at high speeds on public roads flanked by lampposts, trees, bus
7 shelters, houses, and walls. The purpose of this study was to understand how engagement in
8 TT might contribute to life meaning and give expression to our fundamental questions about
9 existence. Four male athletes participated in life history interviews. Data were analysed using
10 an existential-narrative approach and two representative stories identified: *'That was the*
11 *pivotal thing'*, and *'You're living your life, not just existing'*. Themes were interpreted from an
12 existential perspective, addressing authenticity, boundary situations, mortality and meaning.
13 Riders constructed boundary situations as instrumental in their active choice to compete at TT.
14 Within-TT experiences encompassed myriad sub-themes including conflicting emotions,
15 perceptions of risk, flow and love for the sport, many reflecting TT as a site for engaging fully
16 with life. Findings provide novel insight into riders' experiences by interpreting their stories
17 through an existential lens. We also suggest that classic theory and research, based on risk-
18 taking and personality, does not adequately address motivation across all extreme sports.

19

20 *Keywords: Isle of Man TT, extreme sports, identity, existentialism, narrative inquiry*

21

22 **Experiences leading elite motorcycle road racers to participate at the**
23 **Isle of Man Tourist Trophy (TT): An existential perspective**

24 The Isle of Man TT (TT) is an annual motorcycle race meeting held over a 37 and
25 three-quarter mile course on the public roads of the Isle of Man. TT is an integral part of
26 island life and central to the tourist industry, contributing around £25 million per annum to
27 the local economy (Isle of Man Government, 2017). It is a festival of motorcycling, bringing
28 joy and pleasure to many across the globe. Thousands of fans flock to the Island for a two-
29 week party, riding the course and marvelling at the incredible skill of competitors during
30 racing. Conversely, there is anguish and sorrow for some. Serious accidents and fatalities are,
31 regrettably, a regular occurrence and indeed unavoidable given the inherent risks associated
32 with the sport. TT has its own powerful energy, and people are drawn to that in a big way
33 (Rinehart, 2018).

34 **Extreme sports: A confusing discourse**

35 Non-traditional sports have been categorised under various umbrella terms,
36 encompassing everything from parkour to BASE jumping, with no common moniker used in
37 the literature (Frühauf, Hardy, Pfoestl, Hoellen, & Kopp, 2017). The terms *extreme sport* (see
38 Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013), *action and adventure sport* (see Immonen et al., 2017), and
39 *high-risk sport* (see Kiemle-Gabbay & Lavalley, 2017) have been used at various times.
40 These terms all suggest a deviation beyond what is generally viewed as “normal” or
41 “traditional” (Cohen, Baluch & Duffy, 2018). For the purposes of this study, motorcycle
42 road-racing can be described as an *extreme sport*, defined as a sporting activity where the
43 possibility of fatality or serious injury is an inherent part of participation (Kupciw &
44 MacGregor, 2012). Extreme sports also offer the opportunity for existential reflection and
45 self-actualization as framed by the human form of life (Immonen, Brymer, Davids,
46 Liukkonen, & Jaakkola, 2018).

47 Extreme sports have been studied under various disciplines including psychology,
48 sociology, and, more latterly, philosophy of sport. Investigations into motives for
49 participation have predominantly used mixed samples of participants from a variety of
50 extreme sports (for example, Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013; Willig, 2008). This sampling
51 frame has contributed to a confusing discourse and a muddled collection of research findings
52 (Cohen, 2012; Immonen et al., 2017). Researchers have recently suggested that extreme
53 sports participants should not be treated as a homogenous group (Frühauf et al., 2017), but
54 investigated on an individual basis for a better understanding of motivation and meaning, and
55 the psychological and emotional consequences of participation (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013).
56 The predominant research design employed in this area, quantitative research into personality
57 types (Kerr & Mackenzie, 2012), has overemphasised the risk-taking aspect of motivation to
58 explain participation and has created a biased perspective where participation is perceived as
59 socially unacceptable, pathological, and unnecessarily risky (Immonen et al., 2017). As such,
60 traditional theoretical approaches such as sensation seeking (Breivik, 1996), edgework
61 (Laurendeau, 2006), type T personality (Self, De Vries, Findley, & Reilly, 2006) and
62 psychoanalysis (Hunt, 1996) have been proposed to explain behaviour. Much of this literature
63 lists motivational sources as residing within a person and consisting of innate drives, and
64 typically, entirely disregards cultural contexts and personal life histories. The proliferation of
65 acontextual research, with an overemphasis on risk-taking and personality, has led to other
66 motivational aspects of participation being overlooked (Willig, 2008).

67 Some scholars have also proposed alternative motives for extreme sports
68 participation. These include goal achievement (Jones, Milligan, Llewellyn, Gledhill, &
69 Johnson, 2017), escape from boredom, pushing personal boundaries, and overcoming fear
70 (Kerr & Mackenzie, 2012). Storry (2003) suggested a number of *games* adventurers play as
71 key motives for participation, whereby competence is tested through freely chosen

72 engagement with a risky activity. Flow is an outcome often associated with the peak
73 adventure experience resulting from this *edgework*, a term coined by Thompson (1972) to
74 describe moments of fulfilment or self-realization emerging from experiences of pushing
75 boundaries and negotiating edges. In the sociological literature edgework has been defined as
76 voluntary risk-taking, which provides a means of achieving self-determination and
77 authenticity (Lyng, 1990). The fact that so many people seek out such experiences can be
78 seen as a “critical statement on the nature of modern social life” (Lyng, 1990, p. 883). Thus,
79 extreme sports may encourage positive psychological experiences and fulfil certain quality of
80 life needs in a way that the modern, materialistic, and risk-averse world is unable to offer
81 (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2017b). Indeed, the idea that experiences associated with extreme
82 sport are profound and positive is gaining widespread traction.

83 Recent literature suggests that the psychological and emotional benefits include
84 development of courage and humility (Brymer & Oades, 2009), greater understanding of self
85 (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2012) and providing a sense of purpose or meaning in life (Brymer &
86 Schweitzer, 2017); all of which could be understood as existential themes. Indeed, several
87 key concepts from existential psychology link closely to high-performance sport: death,
88 meaning, authenticity, anxiety, and boundary situations (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). Adopting
89 an existential perspective implies rejecting deterministic accounts of behaviour (for example,
90 due to personality types) and emphasizing human beings’ situated freedom, capacity to take a
91 stance on their existence, and make choices knowing one could choose otherwise (Cooper,
92 2003).

93 **Isle of Man TT: Profligate sensation seeking or a site for authentic living?**

94 TT is marketed as the pinnacle of the road-racing calendar; an “intoxicating mix of
95 prestige, danger, speed, and excitement” (Savov, 2015). Racing a motorbike between two
96 stone walls at speeds of up to 200 mph is an activity imbued with risk. Since the inaugural

97 race in 1907 the TT course has accounted for over 250 fatalities (Gastelu, 2018). The level of
98 risk and distinctiveness from traditional sports is acutely captured by TT winner Richard
99 Quayle, “If Roger Federer misses a shot, he loses a point. If I miss an apex, I lose my life”
100 (Key, 2017). Furthermore, beyond the fatalities there are numerous cases of catastrophic
101 injury to competitors. For example, in the 2017 Senior race, 16-time TT winner Ian
102 Hutchinson crashed at high speed, breaking his leg badly; the same leg was almost amputated
103 in 2010. He subsequently underwent seven major operations, 37 in total over the course of his
104 career, and returned to action at the 2018 event (McRae, 2018).

105 The resulting popular media conception of TT riders is that they are thrill-seekers or
106 adrenaline junkies (for example, Cary, 2014). This sensation-seeking narrative partly derives
107 from research into a plethora of extreme sports (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2017a). Research
108 suggests that sensation seeking is a personality trait, defined as “the seeking of varied, novel,
109 complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social,
110 legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience” (Zuckerman, 1994, p. 27). Previous
111 quantitative research in this area suggests that there may be a thrill seeking or risk-taking
112 athlete profile, identified on general personality tests, more specific and relevant trait tests
113 and risk-taking questionnaires (Breivik, 1996, Self et al., 2006). However, extreme sports
114 participants regularly refer to experiences other than risk when trying to define their
115 involvement (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2017a).

116 Furthermore, the differing experiential realities of these various sports have been
117 glaringly overlooked (Willig, 2008). Exploring personal stories within each unique sporting
118 subculture is required to understand the variety of personal and cultural meanings assigned to
119 them. Extreme sports are generally evaluated based on subjective, creative, or aesthetic
120 criteria (Lee, 2004; Watson & Parker, 2015) and lack the same competitive elements seen in

145 Existential psychology is rooted in existentialism, a philosophical movement in the
146 European tradition concerned with addressing the fundamental givens of human existence
147 and emphasising individual responsibility (Nesti, 2004). It is generally held to be
148 ontologically realist, assuming there is a reality that exists independent of our views and
149 attempts to understand it (Cooper, 2003). In this sense, existential psychology differs from
150 social constructionist approaches to sport psychology that have often informed qualitative
151 studies (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). However, existentialist epistemology aligns with a
152 constructivist approach, asserting that our attempts to know the reality are always subjective
153 (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). The existential approach is based on a human science conception
154 of psychology (Giorgi, 1970), which contributes to sport psychology by bringing neglected
155 concepts such as courage, authenticity, spirituality, and personal meaning to the fore (Nesti,
156 2004).

157 From an existentialist perspective, athletes' career decision-making (in this case, the
158 rider's decision to race at TT) is grounded in the notions of the personal meaning associated
159 with that career, the opportunities the career provides for authentic existence, and acceptance
160 of responsibility for one's actions (Ronkainen et al., 2013). Cohen (2003) argued that career
161 decision-making, as a major life decision, can be conceptualized as an existential *boundary*
162 *situation* (Jaspers, 1970, p. 179), making it amenable to being investigated through an
163 existential framework (Ronkainen, Tikkanen, Littlewood & Nesti, 2015). Indeed, it has been
164 argued that "career is a project of one's adult productive life in which the struggle for
165 authenticity is most acute" (Maglio, Butterfield & Borgen, 2005, p. 79). Alternatively, if a
166 person is unable to establish a career which fulfils their desires, it can lead to an existential
167 vacuum, with associated feelings of frustration, emptiness, depression, and apathy
168 (Ronkainen et al., 2013).

169 Existentialists suggest that death is the most fundamental limitation of human freedom
170 and an inescapable part of the human condition (Nesti, 2004). This death awareness, overtly
171 acknowledged by TT competitors, has been considered amongst the strongest sources of
172 human anxiety (Yalom, 1980). Anxiety is related to human possibilities and freedom and is
173 experienced because individuals must make choices, and take responsibility for those
174 choices, without absolutely knowing the outcome (Kierkegaard, 1980). These moments of
175 existential anxiety provide opportunities to develop courage, the capacity to move forward
176 despite an uncertain outcome, and more conscious and authentic modes of living (Corlett,
177 1996). This greater understanding of self signals genuine psychological health and provides a
178 platform for personal growth and development (Parry, Robinson, Watson & Nesti, 2007).

179 In sport philosophy, the link between existential authenticity and extreme sports has
180 already been established. Breivik (2010, p. 42) suggests that risk sports present participants
181 with “the possibility of dying and thus for experiencing anxiety and self-confrontation, where
182 one must “press beyond” to affirm oneself authentically.” Exposure to such situations should,
183 according to Heidegger, facilitate a more authentic understanding of what life is about
184 (Breivik, 2010). This suggests that existentialism, high performance sport, and TT have
185 shared common ground in authenticity.

186 TT lies uniquely at the interface between extreme and traditional sports, integrating
187 both risk and direct competition. As such, we tentatively suggest that TT is likely to share
188 many of the features of extreme sports (for example, freedom from social and cultural
189 constraints and development of courage and humility; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013).
190 However, in extreme sports, the competition element is predominantly self-evaluative,
191 existing between participants and the environment (Cohen et al., 2018) whereas TT features a
192 more conventional element of competition. We would therefore expect TT to demonstrate
193 many of the features of traditional sports, such as a competitive mindset, and a will to win.

194 The results of this study will aid in developing the link between existentialism and TT and
195 increase understanding as to which existential themes are most relevant to TT.

196 **Researcher positioning**

197 I (the first author) was born on the Isle of Man and have lived there for much of my
198 life. For the Manx populace, the TT is part of the cultural heritage and the national identity. I
199 grew up with the exhilaration of TT, *the greatest motorcycle road race in the world*
200 (Christian & De Aragues, 2011); sitting on a hedge, without any safety barriers, watching
201 bikes go past at high speed just a metre away. It was, and is still, enthralling. As a child, I
202 remember watching from a spectacular vantage point, so close that I could see the intense
203 focus on the riders' faces and the whites of their eyes as they passed. That evocative image
204 stays with me to this day.

205 My own feelings around TT are mixed. I love the atmosphere and the energy that
206 surrounds the event, the island comes alive during TT fortnight, it is vibrant. However, my
207 father-in-law lost his brother during racing some years ago and TT can be a difficult time of
208 year for him and the extended family. The same will be true for many families with similar
209 stories.

210 **Participants**

211 Initially, I approached 14 male competitors, seeking those who had competed at
212 multiple TTs and secured at least one podium finish. These criteria ensured that riders had
213 sufficient repertoire of relevant experience and events to draw on and, in this sense, could be
214 considered elite performers (Swann, Moran, & Piggott, 2015). The 14 riders had an average
215 age of 40 years, with an average 11 years TT experience. Between them, they had 118
216 podium finishes, including 47 TT wins. Four prospective participants were retired, with an
217 average of 10 years since retirement.

218 Following preliminary correspondence, six riders did not respond further, whilst four
219 were unavailable during the data collection period. Two initial participants were recruited
220 directly, and two further participants were recruited via a snowballing method. I had no prior
221 relationship with prospective participants. The sample included both active and retired racers.
222 The TT subculture is a small population and, as such, personal information that could
223 potentially identify participants has been modified or omitted to protect anonymity.

224 **Procedure**

225 A trusting relationship developed through rapport is key to life-history research
226 wherein participants tell the story of their life, in their own words (Hagemaster, 1992). Prior
227 to the interviews, I corresponded with participants several times to establish this vital rapport-
228 building process. Participants were informed about the nature of the study and provided
229 informed consent before data collection. During the formal interview process, participants
230 appeared relaxed, and it felt as if they were used to talking about their careers; as elite
231 performers, they were well practised at handling media enquiries. However, knowing that
232 they had been promised confidentiality, they quickly moved from conventional stories to
233 more intimate ones that do not appear in the official press. Indeed, one participant
234 commenced the interview by saying:

235 I'll answer everything dead straight. I'll not answer as if you're a [journalist]...
236 because I just talk complete rubbish as no-one's actually interested in the truth. Media
237 are only interested in getting stories. So, I'll not give you anything like that.

238 All interviews commenced with the same broad question: "Can you please tell me how you
239 first became involved in motorcycle racing?" This simple and non-controversial opening
240 allowed participants to provide context. From there, conversations flowed, and I allowed
241 them to talk about whatever experiences they felt were important rather than adhering rigidly
242 to pre-determined themes. I did endeavour to cover certain themes including early years and

243 adolescence, familial and social support, events leading to participants' TT debut, within-TT
244 experiences, injury, and, where pertinent, retirement. Questions were open-ended, allowing
245 participants to answer in ways that they found meaningful (Riessman, 1993). Probes were
246 used to help participants expand on their experiences (for example, "what did you mean when
247 you said...").

248 I interviewed participants once only, due to restricted availability, except for one who
249 agreed to take part in additional member reflections. He was purposefully selected based on
250 his availability, his long and successful career, his experiences of injury and retirement and
251 his current role which keeps him closely involved with motorcycle road-racing. This
252 reflection process was undertaken not as a verification technique but to generate additional
253 data and to facilitate the inclusion of complementary or contradictory results to develop a
254 meticulous, robust, and intellectually enriched understanding of the research (Smith &
255 McGannon, 2017). Interviews occurred at convenient times and locations for participants.
256 Researching elite athletes raises challenges in terms of access and recruitment (Hertz &
257 Imber, 1995) and, as such, one interview was conducted by telephone rather than in person.
258 Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following conclusion of the
259 primary data collection and analysis phase of the research, a diagram outlining the main
260 themes of participants' narratives was produced. This diagram was discussed with one
261 participant, allowing him to contest, at a macro level, how riders' stories had been interpreted
262 and to provide further commentary on the aggregated findings. Brief notes were taken to
263 record this additional rich data.

264 Interview data was supplemented with brief ethnographic fieldwork, which took place
265 at TT between May 26 and June 8, 2018. This mainly included observation of competitors
266 and support staff in free-access areas of the TT paddock and grandstand, ad-hoc
267 conversations, and monitoring of social media. During this time, I took brief descriptive and

268 reflective field notes, together with some photographs to capture the scene. Although limited
269 in scope, this fieldwork helped to sensitize myself during analysis and to contextualise the
270 themes which emerged from the interview data.

271 **Analytic process**

272 I undertook a thematic narrative analysis of the life stories, using Sparkes and Smith's
273 (2014) guidelines. This approach was particularly suited to this dataset because it helps to
274 generate case studies of individuals, groups, and typologies (Riessman, 2008). In thematic
275 narrative analysis, the emphasis is on the content of speech, the "whats" of the stories, and
276 seeks to identify common threads across cases (Riessman, 2008). Interpretation of the
277 narratives involved reading through an existential lens, paying careful attention to how
278 themes, such as meaning, authenticity, and boundary situations were forming the participants'
279 stories.

280 In the initial stage of analysis, I immersed myself in participants' stories, identifying
281 key themes, people, relationships, and events that shaped their experiences. The second stage
282 involved deeper immersion in the excerpts of text relating to each theme, followed by
283 searching for commonalities and differences between the cases in relation to each theme. The
284 final analytic step, member reflections, involved discussing the major themes diagram with
285 the selected participant. The diagram was annotated to record his thoughts and this additional
286 rich data was integrated into the findings and discussion.

287 I adopted a traditional approach to data presentation, interweaving direct quotes from
288 participants (using pseudonyms) with researcher observations and reflections (Sparkes &
289 Smith, 2014). These elements constitute the raw data, providing relevant and sufficient
290 evidence to support the emergent themes. The results attempt to strike a balance between the
291 researcher's voice and the participants' voices in a meaningful and compelling way (Pitney &
292 Parker, 2009).

293 Research credibility

294 Consistent with Sparkes and Smith's (2014) recommendations, several key principles
295 guided the research. The researcher sought to (a) obtain a detailed understanding of the
296 participants' lives, (b) demonstrate to the participants that he cared about their experiences,
297 (c) provide stories that advanced knowledge, (d) provide stories that were interesting and
298 which other academics would care about, (e) acknowledge our own assumptions and pre-
299 conceived ideas, (f) provide information that might educate readers and resonate with their
300 personal experiences, and (g) provide useful information for stakeholders. Aware that validity
301 is a contested issue in qualitative inquiry (Ronkainen et al., 2016; Sparkes, 1998), the
302 following criteria were selected as relevant to the research study: worthy topic, rich rigour,
303 sincerity, credibility, resonance, ethics, and meaningful coherence (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).
304 These standards were met by: (a) having specific inclusion criteria to identify experienced,
305 high-performing athletes, (b) building trust and rapport with the participants, (c) engaging in
306 the participants' environment as fully as practicable through ethnographic fieldwork, (d)
307 engaging in member reflection processes, (e) providing full transcripts / audio recordings, and
308 (f) becoming aware of researcher bias. This was achieved by enhancing reflexive self-
309 awareness through frequent meetings with the research team, who provided a theoretical
310 sounding board (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

311 Results and Discussion

312 Two major narrative themes were discovered connected to participation at TT.
313 Accordingly, we present an analysis of these narrative themes with their central existential
314 threads: (a) *That was the pivotal thing* explores boundary situations leading to competing at
315 TT, and (b) *You're living your life, not just existing*, explores TT as a site for thriving and
316 engaging fully with life.

317 That was the pivotal thing

318 For three of the participants, their path to competing at TT is characterised by
319 boundary situations. For Simon, it was the death of a family member:

320 Watching [TT] I always wanted to do it. I just thought yeah, I'd love to have a [go] at
321 that. Well, I lost my Dad when I was [young] you see, he died quite suddenly. I still say
322 to this day, if my Dad would still be alive, I'd never have raced. [He] wouldn't have let
323 me. That was the pivotal thing really, because when Dad died, I thought, you know
324 what, fuck this. I'm going to live life, [do] what I want to do rather than what people
325 say that you should do.

326 Simon's narrative is notable for the existential themes that it touches upon: death,
327 isolation, meaning, and authenticity (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). He constructs this
328 bereavement as an experience leading to a new sense of freedom, underpinned by an
329 awareness that life is finite, and acting as the catalyst for his road-racing career. The story
330 also encapsulates the attitude that it is better to live the life that you want rather than the life
331 others expect. The death of Simon's father could be viewed as an existential crisis, an event
332 which disturbs normal functioning to a high degree, leading to an awareness of one's own
333 mortality (Yang, Staps, & Hijmans, 2010). Existentialists suggest that acknowledging one's
334 mortality can lead to taking up active responsibility for one's existence and ostensibly a more
335 authentic way of living (May, 1983); paradoxically, death tells a person to face up to life
336 (Watson, 2007). Freed from submission to his father's wishes, Simon made a conscious
337 choice to pursue a career in motorcycle racing. Frankl (1984) draws on the words of
338 Nietzsche, "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how" (p. 84), to explain
339 the importance to people of creating meaning and purpose in the face of negative life events.
340 The deepest quest in human life is this search for meaning; simply to exist is not enough
341 (Shantall, 2003). Simon's account suggests that the death of his father was the catalyst for
342 actively embracing an authentic and meaningful life. Confronting existential crises is critical

343 to developing a more authentic self, possibly leading to long-term performance and wellbeing
344 enhancement (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).

345 Paul described how his short circuit racing career had evolved into an expensive
346 hobby which he could not afford to continue. The debt he amassed had negatively affected
347 his personal life and his mental health:

348 I was in that much debt, I was on the verge of suicide. So, I was [racing short circuits]
349 every other weekend and I was coming out of the fortnight two grand worse off. It was
350 a fucking red line. It took the enjoyment out of racing. All of a sudden, the enjoyment
351 came back. Riding my motorbike at TT and it won't cost me a fortune. In some ways it
352 virtually saved my life because I was going to end up fucking topping myself. I can't
353 handle this [huge] debt. All because I want to ride a motorbike. I'll just fucking hit a
354 [lorry] and I'll not know fuck all about it. I can't handle [this] fucking debt. In some
355 ways, the fucking TT really saved my life.

356 Faced with the career disruption of potentially having to give up “riding this
357 motorbike that I so love and enjoy”, Paul faced a major threat to his athletic identity (Allen-
358 Collinson & Hockey, 2007). The rupture to the self-story that had given meaning and
359 continuity to his life, coupled with a crippling debt offer an explanation as to why Paul
360 considered suicide as a way of resolving his existential crisis. Fear of a loss of meaning or
361 purpose can act as a powerful driver when negotiating within-career transitions (Amundson et
362 al., 2010). In sport, career decisions are often made under conditions of continual change or
363 uncertainty (Borgen, 1997; Trevor-Roberts, 2006) and when financial realities constrain
364 desired career decisions, individuals attempt to make good decisions within the realities of
365 their life contexts (Phillips & Jome, 2005). The tension between the desire for basic financial
366 security and the desire to pursue one's passion is a recurrent factor, often leading to feelings

367 of conflict, confusion, and loss. Career decisions that favour financial security over career
368 passion are often experienced as difficult but necessary sacrifices (Amundson et al., 2010).

369 Elite sport involves some degree of suffering, sacrifice, and hardship (Nesti, 2007): in
370 this case, failure of a personal relationship, mounting debts, and mental health issues.
371 However, existential courage and mental toughness are often derived from such experiences
372 (Nesti, 2007). Paul explained how choosing to race at TT virtually saved his life, describing
373 how “the enjoyment came back” to riding his motorcycle. Further well-being benefits
374 accrued from the whole TT experience through having “a piss up and a fucking good laugh...
375 an awesome, awesome [TT] fortnight”.

376 A critical moment in Alan’s career came immediately after the elation of winning a
377 prestigious championship title. He described the anti-climax following his momentous
378 achievement:

379 My ultimate goal in life was always to [win the title] and I eventually got it. Which is
380 a fantastic feeling. But then you’re in an odd place after that. Once you’ve actually
381 achieved your lifelong goal it’s like, what next? What do you go to next? Do you go
382 and try and win it again? Everything you’ve strived for, you’ve achieved. I was
383 surprised at how I felt afterwards. It was like, well what now?

384 Alan’s boundary situation occurred in the aftermath of achieving his lifelong ambition
385 of winning a championship title. Again, linking to existential themes, up to that point in life
386 he had a clear purpose as he pursued the title. Although winning is often the ultimate goal for
387 elite sportspeople, it may also contribute to their biggest obstacle for future success (Kreiner-
388 Phillips & Orlick, 1993). After the euphoria of achieving his long-held goal, Alan faced an
389 existential crisis and experienced existential anxiety around what to do next, describing it as
390 “being in an odd place”. For athletes, professional sport can be viewed as an important “life
391 project” (Watson, 2011) and comes with a strong athletic identity. If that project ends

392 abruptly, it can pose a significant threat to identity (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2007). Alan
393 reported, in the aftermath of becoming champion, not really knowing what to do but, “your
394 next goal is to win a TT”.

395 Autonomous career decisions have been shown to engender growth, self-awareness
396 and to facilitate a sense of self-assurance to pursue new goals with confidence (Amundson et
397 al., 2010). Alan quickly transitioned from short circuit to road, protecting his strong athletic
398 identity and helping to mediate narrative wreckage (Douglas & Carless, 2016). This freedom
399 to explore and develop one’s own identity has also been related to feelings of excitement,
400 hope and optimism (Amundson et al., 2010). For Alan and Paul, the active choice to compete
401 at TT was storied as being influenced by existential crises and threats to their athletic
402 identities.

403 **You’re living your life, not just existing**

404 When discussing their TT experiences, participants touched on many different themes
405 including conflicting emotions, perceptions of risk, flow and their love for riding
406 motorcycles. However, this second theme, *You’re living your life, not just existing*, focusses
407 on TT as a site for thriving and engaging fully with life. Living and existing are not
408 necessarily analogous; as Seneca (2004, p. 11) warned, “you must not think a man has lived
409 long because he has white hair and wrinkles: he has not lived long, just existed long.”

410 Maddi (2004) suggested that the hardy attitudes of commitment, challenge and control
411 provide the existential courage and motivation to face mortality. Furthermore, Nesti (2007)
412 argued that genuine psychological health results from facing up to mortality and living
413 authentically, promoting personal growth, enriching one’s search for meaning and allowing
414 individuals to thrive. This courage helps individuals to perceive stressful circumstances as (a)
415 normal provocations to development (challenge), (b) manageable (control), and (c) worth
416 investing in (commitment; Maddi, 2004).

417 Simon talked of the need to be fully committed to TT to be successful and to deal
418 with the inescapable adversity encountered along the way, “I just wanted it. I just wanted it. I
419 just fucking wanted it. You’ve got to be committed.” Another participant had a similar take,
420 “You’re prepared to do whatever it takes. You know it can go wrong. You hope it won’t go
421 wrong. It will go wrong for some people, but you hope it’s not you.” Again, if professional
422 sport is viewed as an important “life project” (Watson, 2011), it follows that individuals
423 would take responsibility for committing themselves fully to the activity. Maddi (2004)
424 suggests that someone highly committed prefers to remain involved with the people and
425 events going on around them as a means of engaging with what is experientially interesting
426 and meaningful.

427 Alan described the challenge element of the TT experience and how he felt it relates
428 to the inherent drive for personal growth and development:

429 It’s a calculated risk. It’s human nature to want to push yourself beyond that limit and
430 to see how far you can go. You set yourself goals and to beat them, it’s almost like a
431 built-in human nature thing How far can you go and get away with it.

432 Jackson and Csikszentmihlayi (1999) suggest that self-improvement is not possible without
433 taking risks. In studies of extreme sports participants, self-improvement narratives have
434 illustrated the importance of personal growth and development through risk-taking activities
435 (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2012). Risk can never be eliminated from the TT experience,
436 however, the term *calculated risk* suggests that thorough planning and forethought are
437 required to reduce the level of risk to an acceptable level. Indeed, careful planning and
438 calculation are themes mirrored in a recent study on proximity flying (Holmbom, Brymer, &
439 Schweitzer, 2017). Furthermore, through my ethnographic fieldwork, I can attest to the
440 meticulous detail that riders go to in preparing their machines for competition. A willingness
441 to take *calculated risks* can provide participants with opportunities to enhance self-

442 knowledge and avoid stagnation (Crust & Keegan, 2010). This notion of risk-taking as
443 contributing to a continuing project of self-improvement links to the central existential
444 themes of identity and meaning.

445 The recurring narrative of *pushing the limits*, ties closely to Lyng's (1990) concept of
446 edgework. Indeed, 17-time TT winner Dave Molyneux's (2011) autobiography is entitled *The*
447 *Racer's Edge*. Lyng (1990) suggests that when risk-takers negotiate this "boundary between
448 chaos and order" they engage their "true" selves (p. 855). Edgework takes place around
449 cultural and physical boundaries, such as those between life and death, but boundaries of self
450 also need to be negotiated, as they limit what is possible in terms of self-realisation and
451 expanding one's life experiences (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002). Indeed, one participant alluded
452 to the potentially limiting effects of self-determined boundaries:

453 If you go beyond the limits of your talent, something's going to go wrong. If you're at
454 a short circuit, you're probably going to ride off onto the grass and fall off and bounce
455 along a bit. If you go beyond the limits of your talent [at TT] you're going to hit a brick
456 wall. Perhaps that's why I didn't win, I should have tried a bit harder maybe.

457 However, the *limits of your talent* comment could be comparable to the earlier *calculated risk*
458 comment, with both riders cognisant of a subjective level of risk that is acceptable to them. In
459 this way, both riders imply control over their actions.

460 Control was constructed as a critical element of the TT experience. One participant
461 talked of being in full control, despite the challenges appearing high to external observers:

462 I don't see like you. You see from the outside looking in. I'm riding my bike as hard
463 and to a level at what the machinery's capable of on that day, as hard as I can. So, I'm
464 in control. I control my own destiny. If the bike isn't right, it's up to me what I do.
465 When the bike's shit, I'd fucking [cruise] round some days. Fight another day. The
466 oldest, greatest riders, if it isn't right, they don't do it on that day.

467 Miller and Frey (1996) suggested that extreme sports participants are drawn only to danger
468 they can control. Indeed, Laurendeau (2006) argued that skydivers fiercely defend the
469 position that their dangerous environments are within their control. However, Lyng (1990)
470 contended that participants create an “illusory sense of control” which allows tasks to
471 appear less threatening (p. 872). Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) suggested that participants
472 “carefully create a context of controlled uncertainty as a stage within which they can act”
473 (p.12). Whether real or illusory, sustaining a sense of control appears critical to extreme
474 sports participants (Laurendeau, 2006). Pushing boundaries whilst retaining control is the
475 crux of the challenge at TT.

476 As inferred from the above quote, effective long-term participation hinges on
477 individuals having the courage, if circumstances are not right, to back off and wait for
478 another day and this is an element found to be common to all extreme sports (Arijs et al.,
479 2017). Indeed, one participant talked of being at one with the circuit in a similar manner to
480 how extreme sports participants talk about being at one with the natural environment (Brymer
481 & Schweitzer, 2013), “what makes the TT so magical is that it’s your own circuit. And
482 you’re not racing somebody else. You’re racing the circuit”. However, the competitive
483 dimension to TT means that if riders have several relatively poor seasons, they risk losing
484 their ride with one of the professional teams, with potentially serious financial and
485 performance implications. This additional pressure, not generally factored into creative or
486 aesthetic extreme sports, could lead riders to consider pushing beyond their accepted limits.

487 Brymer and Schweitzer (2017b) posit that extreme sports are invigorating. The
488 findings from the current study add credence to this argument, suggesting that extreme sports
489 participation can enhance psychological well-being. The types of experiences described by
490 participants in this study have been characterised as transcendental by athletes from other
491 extreme sports; a place of refuge from day-to-day concerns (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2017b).

492 Transcendental experiences can only exist in opposition to a *mundane mode of being in the*
493 *world*, an idea consistent with Dienske's (2000) notion of tacit knowledge and meaning being
494 derived from one's bodily experiences. This dichotomy between the transcendent and the
495 mundane was vividly captured by one participant, whose comments closely resemble those
496 presented in recent qualitative research from other extreme sports (Brymer & Schweitzer,
497 2017b; Holmbom et al., 2017):

498 I always say, [racing a motorbike] you're living your life, not just existing. You're
499 fucking living your life. Most people, they're just existing. They're just going to work
500 to fucking pay their mortgage.

501 **Future Research**

502 Two additional themes addressed by participants were injury and retirement. These
503 represent significant threats to the life project and emerged as important themes warranting
504 further investigation. However, since our research was focussed on understanding how
505 participants became elite TT riders and their experiences of competing at TT, a detailed
506 analysis of these themes is beyond the scope of this manuscript. Briefly, it is worth
507 mentioning that participants gave numerous examples of successfully returning to
508 competition after suffering appalling injuries and enduring long periods of convalescence.
509 For example:

510 I hit one of those concrete posts. That broke my hip. I'd broken this arm. I'd broken
511 that leg. [Later] everyone was saying to me, that's it, you'll give it up now, you'll give
512 it up, you'll give it up. And I was like, no. I want it. I know it sounds daft, but you've
513 got to take a bit of a knock to know how much you want it. It would have been quite
514 easy for me to go, you know what, it's not for me that, I'll go off and play fucking
515 golf or something or snooker. Nah, it's not stopping me this. No, I want this. So, I dug
516 in deep and fucking came back the following year.

517 Developing a deeper understanding of how riders stay fully committed to their sport, the
518 psychosocial processes that help them, and the mental health implications during these long
519 periods of recovery are important directions for future research.

520 Furthermore, although the narratives constructed by participants indicated that their
521 retirement decisions were voluntary, they were unable to explain their reasoning clearly.
522 Indeed, two participants continued to race for a short period even after deciding to retire,
523 suggesting it to be a very difficult decision for them. Retirement from TT can be viewed as a
524 journey of existential “symbolic death” or “identity crisis” (Meyer & Watson, 2014), a move
525 away from truly *living* to merely *existing*. Exploring these retirement decisions in more detail
526 would enhance the extant literature on career-termination in extreme sports.

527 **General Discussion**

528 The dominant cultural narrative in Western Europe, based on the classical-theological
529 *imago Dei* concept, values sanctity of life over quality of life (Jacoby, 1998). This narrative
530 has perhaps partly fuelled sensationalist media portrayals of motorcycle road-racing which
531 often pathologize competitors. However, participants in this study found personal meaning in
532 competing at TT and constructed the experience as invigorating, despite the obvious risk to
533 their physical being. Existentialist psychologists suggest that by creating or discovering
534 meaning in their lives and by living authentically, individuals can thrive (Nesti, 2004).
535 Arousal and adrenaline are inherent aspects of the generic sporting experience but attributing
536 the motivation to compete at TT entirely to thrill-seeking explanations of behaviour is both
537 ignorant and naïve. Results indicate that the TT experience clearly links to the existential
538 themes of boundary situations, mortality, and meaning, suggesting deeper philosophical
539 themes lie behind the desire to participate at TT.

540 The findings from the present study both confirm and extend contemporary
541 qualitative research findings linking existentialism and extreme sports (Breivik, 2010;

542 Brymer, 2010; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2012, 2013, 2017b). Specifically, participants
543 undertake careful, detailed planning to minimise the possibility of negative outcomes since
544 extreme sports trigger a range of positive experiential outcomes (Brymer, 2010). This
545 suggests that the TT experience is, in many ways, akin to that of sports such as BASE-
546 jumping, big wave surfing, and solo rope-free climbing.

547 However, there are key, fundamental differences between the TT and other extreme
548 sport experiences. In our study, participants' motivation to race at the TT appeared to
549 emanate from biographical boundary situations, specifically those relating to a metaphorical
550 or physical death. Facing finitude emerged as a central experience triggering riders to engage
551 with the TT as a way to live the life they have to the fullest, and not just 'exist'. In addition,
552 TT uniquely blends the values of traditional competition with the ethos of an extreme sport.
553 This creates an environment involving the features of extreme sports that tend to focus more
554 on the intrinsic rewards of the experience yet also providing extrinsic rewards such as money
555 and prestige. A strange duality exists where there's an attachment to and a detachment from
556 the material world.

557 The main strength of the narrative interview is its inherent subjectivity and ability to
558 capture contextual detail; the story is irreducibly perspectival (Greenhalgh, Russell, &
559 Swinglehurst, 2005). However, this can also be a limitation when stories are used as research
560 data. Furthermore, a story is an interaction between participant and researcher, who (actively
561 or passively) shapes the telling. The challenge of narrative research is to capture the inherent
562 subjectivity, inconsistency and emotionality of stories as data and interpret them
563 appropriately (Greenhalgh et al., 2005). For the first author, as a novice qualitative
564 researcher, working on a previously unexamined topic, this proved somewhat challenging.
565 However, having a dependable, knowledgeable and experienced research team to lean on led
566 to the methodological elements of the research becoming a key strength. Although the study

567 is based on just four participants, we believe that valuable insight was gained into how they
568 became elite TT racers and how they ascribe meaning to their sport.

569 **Conclusion**

570 The purpose of this study was to explore how participants storied their journeys of
571 becoming elite TT racers and how engagement with such a dangerous sport might contribute
572 to their life meaning and give expression to fundamental questions about existence. Riders
573 constructed boundary situations as being instrumental in their active choice to compete at TT,
574 whilst TT was constructed as a site for engaging fully with life. Findings provide novel
575 insight into the experiences of TT competitors and help to broaden theory by interpreting
576 their stories through an existential lens. Findings also suggest that existing personality-based
577 theory and research does not adequately address motivation across all extreme sports. This is
578 the first study exploring TT riders' experiences and provides a platform for future research.

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