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

R. A. Sille N. J. Ronkainen and D. A. Tod

School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

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

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

Extreme sports: a confusing discourse

Non-traditional sports have been categorised under various umbrella terms, encompassing everything from parkour to BASE jumping, with no common moniker used in the literature (Frühauf et al. 2017). The terms *extreme sport* (see Brymer and Schweitzer 2013), *action and adventure sport* (see Immonen et al. 2017) and *high-risk sport* (see Kiemle-Gabbay and Lavallee 2017) have been used at various times. These terms all suggest a deviation beyond what is generally viewed as 'normal' or

'traditional' (Cohen, Baluch and Duffy 2018). For the purposes of this study, motorcycle road-racing can be described as an *extreme sport*, defined as a sporting activity where the possibility of fatality or serious injury is an inherent part of participation (Kupciw and MacGregor 2012). Extreme sports also offer the opportunity for existential reflection and self-actualisation as framed by the human form of life (Immonen et al. 2018).

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

Some scholars have also proposed alternative motives for extreme sports participation. These include goal achievement (Jones et al. 2017), escape from boredom, pushing personal boundaries and overcoming fear (Kerr and Mackenzie 2012). Story (2003) suggested a number of *games* adventurers play as key motives for participation, whereby competence is tested through freely chosen engagement with risky activity. Flow is an outcome often associated with the peak adventure experience resulting from this *edgework*, a term coined by Thompson (1972) to describe moments of fulfilment or self-realisation emerging from experiences of pushing boundaries and negotiating edges. In the sociological literature, edgework has been defined as voluntary risk-taking, which provides a means of achieving self-determination and authenticity (Lyng 1990). The fact that so many people seek out such experiences can be seen as a 'critical statement on the nature of modern social life' (Lyng 1990, p. 883). Thus, extreme sports may encourage positive psychological experiences and fulfil certain quality of life needs in a way that the modern, materialistic and risk-averse world is unable to offer (Brymer and Schweitzer 2017b). Indeed, the idea that experiences associated with extreme sport are profound and positive is gaining widespread traction.

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

Isle of Man TT: profligate sensation seeking or a site for authentic living?

TT is marketed as the pinnacle of the road-racing calendar; an 'intoxicating mix of prestige, danger, speed, and excitement' (Savov 2015). Racing a motorbike between two stone walls at speeds of up

to 200 mph is an activity imbued with risk. Since the inaugural race in 1907, the TT course has accounted for over 250 fatalities (Gastelu 2018). The level of risk and distinctiveness from traditional sports is acutely captured by TT winner Richard Quayle, 'If Roger Federer misses a shot, he loses a point. If I miss an apex, I lose my life' (Key 2017). Furthermore, beyond the fatalities, there are numerous cases of catastrophic injury to competitors. For example, in the 2017 Senior race, 16-time TT winner Ian Hutchinson crashed at high speed, breaking his leg badly; the same leg was almost amputated in 2010. He subsequently underwent seven major operations, 37 in total over the course of his career, and returned to action at the 2018 event (McRae 2018).

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

Furthermore, the differing experiential realities of these various sports have been glaringly overlooked (Willig 2008). Exploring personal stories within each unique sporting subculture is required to understand the variety of personal and cultural meanings assigned to them. Extreme sports are generally evaluated based on subjective, creative, or aesthetic criteria (Lee 2004; Watson and Parker 2015) and lack the same competitive elements seen in more traditional sports. TT uniquely combines the risk of extreme sports with the direct competition of traditional sports.

Despite the media attention and popular accounts of racing, such as biographies, TT has evaded academic inquiry from a human science perspective. Furthermore, the extant literature on extreme sports does not appear to accurately capture the experiences and meanings of those who compete at TT. The purpose of this study was to explore how participants storied their journeys to becoming elite TT racers. Through open-ended life history interviews, we sought to understand how significant people, events and interactions influenced their choice to compete at TT, and how engagement with such a dangerous sport might contribute to their life meaning and give expression to our fundamental questions about existence.

Methodology

Theoretical framework

For the purposes of the study, we drew on existential psychology and narrative methodology to understand how participants constructed meaning in their experiences as TT riders. Existential and narrative approaches share fundamental assumptions about the importance of meaning in human life and the situated nature of human existence within the cultural horizons of pre-given meaning (Richert 2010). Existential psychology provided us with sensitivity to themes of finitude, authenticity, freedom and responsibility, which lie at the heart of its understanding of what it means to be human. Narrative approach, on the other hand, offered the methodological 'tools' to elicit stories and analyse the data. The methodological approach has been previously used to explore athletes' experiences of existential dilemmas such as ageing (Ronkainen, Ryba and Nesti 2013) and injury (Ronkainen and Ryba 2017).

Existential psychology is rooted in existentialism, a philosophical movement in the European tradition concerned with addressing the fundamental givens of human existence and emphasising individual responsibility (Nesti 2004). It is generally held to be ontologically realist, assuming there is a reality that exists independent of our views and attempts to understand it (Cooper 2003). In this

sense, existential psychology differs from social constructionist approaches to sport psychology that have often informed qualitative studies (Ronkainen and Nesti 2017). However, existentialist epistemology aligns with a constructivist approach, asserting that our attempts to know the reality are always subjective (Ronkainen and Nesti 2017). The existential approach is based on a human science conception of psychology (Giorgi 1970), which contributes to sport psychology by bringing neglected concepts such as courage, authenticity, spirituality and personal meaning to the fore (Nesti 2004).

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

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

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

TT lies uniquely at the interface between extreme and traditional sports, integrating both risk and direct competition. As such, we tentatively suggest that TT is likely to share many of the features of extreme sports (for example, freedom from social and cultural constraints and development of courage and humility; Brymer and Schweitzer 2013). However, in extreme sports, the competition element is predominantly self-evaluative, existing between participants and the environment (Cohen, Baluch and Duffy 2018) whereas TT features a more conventional element of competition. We would, therefore, expect TT to demonstrate many of the features of traditional sports, such as a competitive mindset, and a will to win. The results of this study will aid in developing the link between existentialism and TT and increase understanding as to which existential themes are most relevant to TT.

Researcher positioning

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

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

Participants

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

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

Procedure

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

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

All interviews commenced with the same broad question: 'Can you please tell me how you first became involved in motorcycle racing?' This simple and non-controversial opening allowed participants to provide context. From there, conversations flowed, and I allowed them to talk about whatever experiences they felt were important rather than adhering rigidly to pre-determined themes. I did endeavour to cover certain themes including early years and adolescence, familial and social support, events leading to participants' TT debut, within-TT experiences, injury, and, where pertinent, retirement. Questions were open-ended, allowing participants to answer in ways that they found meaningful (Riessman 1993). Probes were used to help participants expand on their experiences (for example, 'what did you mean when you said...').

I interviewed participants once only, due to restricted availability, except for one who agreed to take part in additional member reflections. He was purposefully selected based on his availability, his long and successful career, his experiences of injury and retirement and his current role which keeps him closely involved with motorcycle road-racing. This reflection process was undertaken not as a verification technique but to generate additional data and to facilitate the inclusion of complementary or contradictory results to develop a meticulous, robust and intellectually enriched understanding of the research (Smith and McGannon 2017). Interviews occurred at convenient times and locations for

participants. Researching elite athletes raises challenges in terms of access and recruitment (Hertz and Imber 1995) and, as such, one interview was conducted by telephone rather than in person. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following the conclusion of the primary data collection and analysis phase of the research, a diagram outlining the main themes of participants' narratives was produced. This diagram was discussed with one participant, allowing him to contest, at a macro level, how riders' stories had been interpreted and to provide further commentary on the aggregated findings. Brief notes were taken to record this additional rich data.

Interview data was supplemented with brief ethnographic fieldwork, which took place at TT between 26 May and 8 June 2018. This mainly included observation of competitors and support staff in free-access areas of the TT paddock and grandstand, ad-hoc conversations and monitoring of social media. During this time, I took brief descriptive and reflective field notes, together with some photographs to capture the scene. Although limited in scope, this fieldwork helped to sensitise myself during analysis and to contextualise the themes which emerged from the interview data.

Analytic process

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

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

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

Research credibility

Consistent with Sparkes and Smith (2014) recommendations, several key principles guided the research. The researcher sought to (a) obtain a detailed understanding of the participants' lives, (b) demonstrate to the participants that he cared about their experiences, (c) provide stories that advanced knowledge, (d) provide stories that were interesting and which other academics would care about, (e) acknowledge our own assumptions and pre-conceived ideas, (f) provide information that might educate readers and resonate with their personal experiences and (g) provide useful information for stakeholders. Aware that validity is a contested issue in qualitative inquiry (Ronkainen, Watkins and Ryba 2016; Sparkes 1998), the following criteria were selected as relevant to the research study: worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, ethics and meaningful coherence (Sparkes and Smith 2014). These standards were met by: (a) having specific inclusion criteria to identify experienced, high-performing athletes, (b) building trust and rapport with the participants, (c) engaging in the participants' environment as fully as practicable through ethnographic fieldwork, (d) engaging in member reflection processes, (e) providing full transcripts/audio recordings and (f) becoming aware of

researcher bias. This was achieved by enhancing reflexive self-awareness through frequent meetings with the research team, who provided a theoretical sounding board (Smith and McGannon 2017).

Results and discussion

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

That was the pivotal thing

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

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

Simon's narrative is notable for the existential themes that it touches upon: death, isolation, meaning and authenticity (Ronkainen and Nesti 2017). He constructs this bereavement as an experience leading to a new sense of freedom, underpinned by an awareness that life is finite, and acting as the catalyst for his road-racing career. The story also encapsulates the attitude that it is better to live the life that you want rather than the life others expect. The death of Simon's father could be viewed as an existential crisis, an event which disturbs normal functioning to a high degree, leading to an awareness of one's own mortality (Yang, Staps and Hilmans 2010). Existentialists suggest that acknowledging one's mortality can lead to taking up active responsibility for one's existence and ostensibly a more authentic way of living (May 1983); paradoxically, death tells a person to face up to life (Watson 2007). Freed from submission to his father's wishes, Simon made a conscious choice to pursue a career in motorcycle racing. Frankl (2004) draws on the words of Nietzsche, 'He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how' (p. 84), to explain the importance to people of creating meaning and purpose in the face of negative life events. The deepest quest in human life is this search for meaning; simply to exist is not enough (Shantall 2003). Simon's account suggests that the death of his father was the catalyst for actively embracing an authentic and meaningful life. Confronting existential crises is critical to developing a more authentic self, possibly leading to long-term performance and well-being enhancement (Nesti and Littlewood 2011).

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

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

Faced with the career disruption of potentially having to give up 'riding this motorbike that I so love and enjoy', Paul faced a major threat to his athletic identity (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007). The rupture to the self-story that had given meaning and continuity to his life, coupled with a crippling debt offers an explanation as to why Paul considered suicide as a way of resolving his existential crisis. Fear of a loss of meaning or purpose can act as a powerful driver when negotiating within-career transitions

(Amundson et al. 2010). In sport, career decisions are often made under conditions of continual change or uncertainty (Borgen 1997; Trevor-Roberts 2006) and when financial realities constrain desired career decisions, individuals attempt to make good decisions within the realities of their life contexts (Phillips and Jome 2005). The tension between the desire for basic financial security and the desire to pursue one's passion is a recurrent factor, often leading to feelings of conflict, confusion and loss. Career decisions that favour financial security over career passion are often experienced as difficult but necessary sacrifices (Amundson et al. 2010).

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

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

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

Alan's boundary situation occurred in the aftermath of achieving his lifelong ambition of winning a championship title. Again, linking to existential themes, up to that point in life he had a clear purpose as he pursued the title. Although winning is often the ultimate goal for elite sportspeople, it may also contribute to their biggest obstacle for future success (Kreiner-Phillips and Orlick 1993). After the euphoria of achieving his long-held goal, Alan faced an existential crisis and experienced existential anxiety around what to do next, describing it as 'being in an odd place'. For athletes, professional sport can be viewed as an important 'life project' (Watson 2011) and comes with a strong athletic identity. If that project ends abruptly, it can pose a significant threat to identity (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007). Alan reported, in the aftermath of becoming champion, not really knowing what to do but, 'your next goal is to win a TT'.

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

You're living your life, not just existing

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

Maddi (2004) suggested that the hardy attitudes of commitment, challenge and control provide the existential courage and motivation to face mortality. Furthermore, Nesti (2007) argued that genuine psychological health results from facing up to mortality and living authentically, promoting personal growth, enriching one's search for meaning and allowing individuals to thrive. This courage

helps individuals to perceive stressful circumstances as (a) normal provocations to development (challenge), (b) manageable (control) and (c) worth investing in (commitment; Maddi 2004).

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

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

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

Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) suggest that self-improvement is not possible without taking risks. In studies of extreme sports participants, self-improvement narratives have illustrated the importance of personal growth and development through risk-taking activities (Brymer and Schweitzer 2012). Risk can never be eliminated from the TT experience; however, the term *calculated risk* suggests that thorough planning and forethought are required to reduce the level of risk to an acceptable level. Indeed, careful planning and calculation are themes mirrored in a recent study on proximity flying (Holmbom, Brymer and Schweitzer 2017). Furthermore, through my ethnographic fieldwork, I can attest to the meticulous detail that riders go to in preparing their machines for competition. A willingness to take *calculated risks* can provide participants with opportunities to enhance self-knowledge and avoid stagnation (Crust and Keegan 2010). This notion of risk-taking as contributing to a continuing project of self-improvement links to the central existential themes of identity and meaning.

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

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

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

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

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

Miller and Frey (1996) suggested that extreme sports participants are drawn only to danger they can control. Indeed, Laurendeau (2006) argued that skydivers fiercely defend the position that their

dangerous environments are within their control. However, Lyng (1990) contended that participants create an 'illusionary sense of control' which allows tasks to appear less threatening (p. 872). Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) suggested that participants 'carefully create a context of controlled uncertainty as a stage within which they can act' (p.12). Whether real or illusionary, sustaining a sense of control appears critical to extreme sports participants (Laurendeau 2006). Pushing boundaries whilst retaining control is the crux of the challenge at TT.

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

Brymer and Schweitzer (2017b) posit that extreme sports are invigorating. The findings from the current study add credence to this argument, suggesting that extreme sports participation can enhance psychological well-being. The types of experiences described by participants in this study have been characterised as transcendental by athletes from other extreme sports; a place of refuge from day-to-day concerns (Brymer and Schweitzer 2017b). Transcendental experiences can only exist in opposition to a *mundane mode of being in the world*, an idea consistent with Dienske's (2000) notion of tacit knowledge and meaning being derived from one's bodily experiences. This dichotomy between the transcendent and the mundane was vividly captured by one participant, whose comments closely resemble those presented in recent qualitative research from other extreme sports (Brymer and Schweitzer 2017b; Holmbom, Brymer and Schweitzer 2017):

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

Future research

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

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

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

Furthermore, although the narratives constructed by participants indicated that their retirement decisions were voluntary, they were unable to explain their reasoning clearly. Indeed, two participants continued to race for a short period even after deciding to retire, suggesting it to be a very

difficult decision for them. Retirement from TT can be viewed as a journey of existential 'symbolic death' or 'identity crisis' (Meyer and Watson 2014), a move away from truly *living* to merely *existing*. Exploring these retirement decisions in more detail would enhance the extant literature on career-termination in extreme sports.

General discussion

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

The findings from the present study both confirm and extend contemporary qualitative research findings linking existentialism and extreme sports (Breivik 2010; Brymer 2010; Brymer and Schweitzer 2012, 2013, 2017b). Specifically, participants undertake careful, detailed planning to minimise the possibility of negative outcomes since extreme sports trigger a range of positive experiential outcomes (Brymer 2010). This suggests that the TT experience is, in many ways, akin to that of sports such as BASE-jumping, big wave surfing and solo rope-free climbing.

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

The main strength of the narrative interview is its inherent subjectivity and ability to capture contextual detail; the story is irreducibly perspectival (Greenhalgh, Russell and Swinglehurst 2005). However, this can also be a limitation when stories are used as research data. Furthermore, a story is an interaction between participant and researcher, who (actively or passively) shapes the telling. The challenge of narrative research is to capture the inherent subjectivity, inconsistency and emotionality of stories as data and interpret them appropriately (Greenhalgh, Russell and Swinglehurst 2005). For the first author, as a novice qualitative researcher, working on a previously unexamined topic, this proved somewhat challenging. However, having a dependable, knowledgeable and experienced research team to lean on led to the methodological elements of the research becoming a key strength. Although the study is based on just four participants, we believe that valuable insight was gained into how they became elite TT racers and how they ascribe meaning to their sport.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how participants storied their journeys to becoming elite TT racers and how engagement with such a dangerous sport might contribute to their life meaning and give expression to fundamental questions about existence. Riders constructed boundary situations as being instrumental in their active choice to compete at TT, whilst TT was constructed

as a site for engaging fully with life. Findings provide novel insight into the experiences of TT competitors and help to broaden theory by interpreting their stories through an existential lens. Findings also suggest that existing personality-based theory and research does not adequately address motivation across all extreme sports. This is the first study exploring TT riders' experiences and provides a platform for future research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

R. A. Sille is studying for a Professional Doctorate in Sport & Exercise Psychology at LJMU.

N. J. Ronkainen is a Postdoctoral Researcher at LJMU.

D. A. Tod is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Psychology at LJMU.

ORCID

R. A. Sille  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1363-6043>

N. J. Ronkainen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3785-0458>

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