Edith Cowan University
Research Online

Australian Counter Terrorism Conference | Security Research Institute Conferences

2012

Commitment and the 1% Motorcycle Club: Threats to the Brotherhood

Kira J. Harris
Edith Cowan University, kira.harris@ecu.edu.au

Originally published in the Proceedings of the 3rd Australian Counter Terrorism Conference, Novotel Langley Hotel, Perth, Western Australia, 3rd-5th December, 2012
This Conference Proceeding is posted at Research Online.
http://ro.ecu.edu.au/act/19

COMMITMENT AND THE 1% MOTORCYCLE CLUB: THREATS TO THE BROTHERHOOD

Kira J. Harris
Edith Cowan University
Perth, Western Australia
kira.harris@ecu.edu.au

Abstract

The brotherhood ethos is the founding principle of the 1% motorcycle clubs community. Interviews with former members and partners show how threatening this social bond can reduce satisfaction and lead to doubts over involvement with the club.

Keywords
One Percent Motorcycle Clubs; Brotherhood; Identity; Exiting

INTRODUCTION

The rebellious events in Hollister in 1947 forged a bond among unemployed World War II veterans who took pleasure in their underdog status from the American Motorcycle Association's exclusionary statement, which presented 1% of motorcyclists as 'outlaws' who did not integrate well into society (Wolf, 1991; Yates, 2007). Revelling in the image, the 1% patch became the symbol of non-conformity and distinction in a new defined subculture within the motorcycle society (Barger, Zimmerman, & Zimmerman, 2001; Dulaney, 2007). Unique in their overt display of symbols and the acceptance of social stigma, clubs found amusement in their marginalised identity and emphasised the social milieu of their club as the only outlet providing sanctuary – ensuring mutual support and reinforcement for cultural norms (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995; Quinn & Koch, 2003; Wolf, 1991).

Australia's history with the 1% has been heavily influenced by the American culture with descriptions from the 1980's and beforehand, emphasizing the biker subculture as an outgrowth of lower class cultural values opposing western middle-class norms (Watson, 1980); however, members of the modern era are more likely to be conforming to the values of capitalism and consumerism. Lasting through this cultural shift is the purist values derived from the subcultural roots, primarily the premise of the 'brotherhood of bikers'. The bond between members is forged through intense and exclusive membership that emphasises moral, emotional and material interdependence, and reinforces the self-image of social pariahs (Hopper & Moore, 2007; Quinn, 2001; Wolf, 1991). This fusion of dependence leads to the 'spiralling of commitment', where investments and organizational pressures serve to entwine the club and member's identity, and ensure the development of extreme loyalty to each other and the club - promoting the 'all on one, one on all' mentality.

Watson (1982) compared the value systems of 1% clubs to those in a religious sect via participant observation, determining the 1% subculture parallels religious sects by the demands and nature of commitment required from members on the pursuit to righteousness. The 1% clubs seek exclusivity through prescribed behaviours, dress and ritualistic activities (Hopper & Moore, 1983, 2007). They maintain a distinctive and recognisable value system and lifestyle that is isolated from the mainstream social environment which enhances the members' experiences of belonging (Hopper & Moore, 1983). Furthermore, Taylor (1988) presented three principle elements of commitment identified in fundamentalist organizations, and supported by Wright's (1987) findings, that operate to reinforce membership as an intrinsic part of the self-identity serve true to the 1% community; (1) ensuring member's behaviour requires socio-psychological investments, (2) decisions reinforcing investments are advocated as the only feasible option, and (3) any efforts to avoid investments only serve to consolidate the psychological investment of the member. This dedication, with great emphasis on loyalty and exclusivity, promotes a sect-like devotion to the club and the belief that membership is for life.

Under certain conditions a member's commitment to the club can be threatened to the extent where significant sacrifices will be made in order to leave. This paper will focus on some of the conditions which threaten the fabric of the 1% motorcycle club identity, primarily focusing on those which jeopardise the ideological

foundation; the brotherhood. This study of 1% clubs is relevant in understanding unconventional ideological groups, not from a legal standpoint but in developing knowledge of the extreme commitment to a group identity that propagates extreme measures to defend group goals. Similar to other radical ideological groups, 1% clubs possess the psychological drive to use violence and intimidation to protect and enhance their identity.

Examples are taken from interviews with former members and partners of 1% clubs and informal discussions with patched members and associates; all names used have been changed in order to protect both the participant and their club. All former members interviewed expressed a great sense of power achieved through their involvement: the status of others knowing who you are, of being somebody, and knowing your 'brothers' had your back; thus challenges to these aspect of the biker identity appear to be significant motivators in the decision to leave.

PATCH-OVERS

Formally, 'patch-overs' occur when the members of a smaller club are congruent with the assuming clubs persona and meet the required membership standards (Quinn & Koch, 2003). In reality, clubs commit patch-overs as a method of asserting power and/or acquiring territory and regional strength during inter-club conflict. The members of the subjugated club are required to hand-over their colours, and usually, re-prospect for the bigger club. Prospecting allows the club to determine the worthiness of the 'recruit' by issuing tasks ranging from menial labour to civil disobedience, and the resocialisation into group norms and loyalty (Anti-Defamation League, 2011; Ballard, 1997; Montgomery, 1976).

'Patch-overs' threaten the distinct identity of each club by removing inter-club boundaries. In some instances, members can assume the new collective identity; however, the loss of status and negative interaction can exacerbate intergroup conflict and reduce member identification. This becomes a time where members of the smaller club can be disillusioned by the internalised collective loss and cultural processes. The suppression causes the loss of esteem experienced during the patch-over, with members knowing they are now controlled by another club, especially when their symbolic patch is displayed on "a *colour curtain with all these clubs that they had busted up over the years*" as a trophy.

The reduced status from patched member to prospect motivates questioning of the members' identity and creates negative morale. Jack* describes this experience as a loss of status and destruction of positive club relationships. Involvement in club activities no longer achieved the same level of enjoyment as members of the larger club had not developed relationships with the subjugated club members; "*You weren't welcome with open arms. You had to go through the process, again. So you were nothing, really. You go from up there, to down to the bottom*." The loss of status, and lack of inclusiveness and camaraderie, lead to the decline in the perceived brotherhood and resulted in the questioning of commitment and sacrifice for club activities. The doubts continued across to the club's violent methods confessing he "*started to have a conscience"* and feel uncomfortable with the tasks he was being asked to do.

CHANGING GROUP DYNAMICS

Quinn and Forsyth (2011) argue 1% clubs today are made of members endorsing varying commitment to both the founding brotherhood values, and the entrepreneurial aspects of the club identity. The two ideologies are compatible in the sense that those with strong purist values are not anti-entrepreneurial; nor are the entrepreneurs looking to change the existing value system. Yet, Quinn and Forsyth (2011) differentiate members on the difference of priorities – placing club values above and beyond other concerns, or the preservation and advancement of the club through growth and financial power. For these entrepreneurial members, temporary sacrifices of club values are deemed acceptable if they serve a greater purpose for the club, but for those seeking a cohesive brotherhood the change in group dynamics can be detrimental to the identification with the club.

While chapters tend to be small with strong bonds formed in a tight-knit environment, a couple of clubs have begun introducing younger recruits to operate within the club businesses and provide strength if a bikie-war should occur. Adam* disclosed this rapid recruitment of young males during the expansion stage of the club as detrimental to the brotherhood ethos "*I thought they would be a little more cautious on who they recruit. I didn't*

think there would be so many dickheads, you know a lot of idiots mate. I don't like them". This rapid recruitment and the inclusion of non-patched members increases the risk of fragmentation, and dilutes the distinctiveness and exclusivity of the club identity.

Describing these new recruits as "*born-again rich kids"*, the intra-club conflict comes from the generational differences and moderation of hedonism, "*they think just because they've got a patch on their back they've got a little bit of power"*. While older members are aware public displays of deviant behaviours bring unwanted attention, younger members acting on impulse can create a fanatical environment and spur on in-group biases. The differences in behavioural expectations can be a source of conflict between members, and can reduce identification, as Adam asks *"how am I supposed to have this passion for this club when I don't even like half the people in it?"*

EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

While the club identity remains positive, dominant and well-integrated, it is unlikely there will be any temptation to leave. However, the very nature of 1% clubs requires an intense commitment from members that impacts on multiple facets of their lives and demands a considerable amount of time and resources. When outside sources grow in personal significance the clubs have to compete for dominance.

Intimate partner relationship can make demands on time and resources that makes balancing multiple commitments unsustainable, particularly when the partner is not involved in that lifestyle.

> *I met my wife and I guess it was sort of, it was almost like you either don't be in it and we'll get married or if you're in it, your sort of. She had nothing to do with that side of my life at all.*

The effect of women negating commitment to the club is a common theme in many autobiographical accounts of former club members; consequently, the role of women is mediated by the overt masculine dominated culture (Quinn, 1987). However, developing significant relationships external to the club, whether an intimate dyad, family or other significant source, can reduce insulation from the larger society and disrupt club socialisation through normative ambiguity (Demant, Slootman, Buijs, & Tillie, 2008; Fink & Hearne, 2008; Garfinkel, 2007; Wright, 1987).

A shift in reference groups can play a significant role in the questioning of club norms. For example, Mark* began regular martial arts training and adopted the norms of his new training associates. The resocialisation into new groups allows a person to adopt new standards to judge their past and/or current behaviours, and if these new groups are considered significant to the member, failing to meet these standards can be motivation to leave the club. For Mark, his personal goals in martial arts training conflicted with his behaviour with the 1% club;

> *It was affecting my training when I was getting on the drugs here and there. But I was only getting on drugs here and there when I caught up with the group and that was when the signs started kicking in. . . .Yeah it started ticking over because, I'd lose the weight, I'd lose the muscle, I'd lose everything that I had worked for. I lost it all in a night. And I had worked my arse off for it.*

His commitment to training meant reduced involvement in the drug scene, which coincided with beginning to question the moral aspects of his role at the club *"I was more like a debt-collector without collecting any debts. And I didn't like it because I trained for the complete opposite reason".* The two group identities presented norms that were in conflict with each other. The desire to reduce the impact of drug use, and acknowledging drugs were only used when around other club members, led to the reduction of involvement with 1% club scene.

POLICE PRESSURE

Law enforcement insists the clubs, both locally and abroad, are significant players in organised crime, to the point of rivalling and collaborating with traditional organised crime syndicates and drawing considerable attention from police (Barker, 2004; Haut, 1998; Hill, 1980; Quinn, 2001; Smith, 2002; Tretheway & Katz, 1998). Law enforcement efforts can work in two ways; cause the group to fragment under pressure, or conversely, increase the cohesiveness of the group – strengthening the 'us against them' mentality. For Chris*,

police pressure did cause him to leave the club, but the decision was not based on the threats of negative sanctions from police. Still maintaining positive attitudes towards his brothers, he emphasizes the need to leave the state in order to protect the club and maintain his status as "*a solid guy"*. Knowing the police were creating an environment that could potentially put him in a position that would jeopardize club loyalty he turned down the alleged offering of $15,000 to provide information, sold everything he owned and left the state quickly. The brotherhood and depth of camaraderie provides the psychological impetus to neglect mainstream standards and threats to the individual are overwhelmed for the immediate need to protect the group (Quinn & Forsyth, 2011).

Leaving the club

Consistent with research into extremist groups barriers to leaving include: economic losses, fear of reprisals from the club, the loss of reputation and protection, and the marginal position following the termination of membership. Leaving any social group can have negative repercussions in terms of the loss of identity and community; however, the 1% clubs can produce additional and more severe consequences that need to be considered by the individual. Despite the myth that the only way to leave a club was in a coffin, it was estimated by Ballard (1997) that the average membership in a 1% club was 6 years. Just like the entry process, exiting involves rules of behaviour that govern if a member leaves in good or bad standing. The benefits of leaving in a positive light are significant in this subculture with those that leave while maintaining respect may have the option of returning in a social capacity, and do not have to fear reprisals from the club. Those who leave in a lesser light are at risk of being "*made an example of"* and the concerns for reprisals linger beyond the physical exit.

Regardless of the exiting status, former members stressed leaving comes at a significant personal cost, by "*losing everything you have"* through ending relationships, selling all assets and investments then disappearing, or relinquishing everything to the club. Members are aware of this loss by observing the exits of others and acknowledged it was a significant barrier in the decision to exit;

> *I thought it was impossible. Because these guys had to move. Had to leave everything that they knew. Everyone that they know. Everything that they had, it's owned by the club. Wasn't owned by them. Ones that had been in the club for 30 years left with nothing. Lost their house. Lost everything. Left the state because they couldn't live here.*

Post exit, there was the expression of grief for the loss of the brotherhood and club identity. This was described as weening of an unhealthy addiction, *"it's a bit like giving up smoking you know. You feel like a smoke every now and then and there are certain aspects of it that were good";* loss of self and belonging, *"At first I actually missed the club because you become them and you, sort of your whole life is, everything you do, you do with them";* and uncertainty, "*not knowing what was going to happen. Not knowing what would happen, not knowing who would, or how, I would get sorted out*". Leaving comes at a significant personal cost with the risks of both physical and fiscal punishment, and for many members these barriers and cycle of socio-psychological investments ensure involvement remains the most likely option.

CONCLUSION

The cultural shift from mainstream rebellion and freedom of the road to the more controversial enterprises has meant those wishing to leave need to be conscientious and deliberate about their intentions. Despite this cultural shift towards a more fiscal based organization, the themes identified in the interviews with former members of 1% clubs indicated it was the founding values of brotherhood and group identity that served as motivation for re-evaluating club membership. Threats to this social bond through external relationships, police pressure and intra-club conflict can reduce satisfaction and lead to doubts over involvement with the club.

REFERENCES

Anti-Defamation League. (2011). *Bigots on bikes: The growing links between white supremacists and biker gangs*. Retrieved from www.adl.org/extremism/ADL_CR_Bigots_on_Bikes_online.pdf.

Ballard, L. M. (1997). "These youngsters change all these traditions": A perspective on "outlaw" motorcycle clubs in Ireland. *Folklore, 108*, 107-114.

Barger, R., Zimmerman, K., & Zimmerman, K. (2001). *Hell's Angel: The life and times of Sonny Barger and the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club*. London: Fourth Estate.

Barker, T. (2004). Exporting american organized crime - Outlaw motorcycle gangs. *Journal of Gang Research, 11*(2), 37-50.

Demant, F., Slootman, M., Buijs, F., & Tillie, J. (2008). *Decline and disengagement: An analysis of processes of deradicalisation*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: IMES, University of Netherlands.

Dulaney, W. L. (2007). A more complete history of the outlaw motorcycle clubs. In A. Veno & K. Sims (Eds.), *The mammoth book of bikers* (pp. 127-136). Philadelphia, PA: Running Press Book Publishers.

Ferrell, J., & Sanders, C. R. (1995). Culture, crime and criminology. In J. Ferrell & C. R. Sanders (Eds.), *Cultural criminology* (pp. 3-24). Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Fink, N. C., & Hearne, E. B. (2008). Beyond terrorism: Deradicalization and disengagement from violent extremism. *International Peace Institute*, 1-27. Retrieved from http://www.ipinst.org/asset/file/384/BETER.pdf

Garfinkel, R. (2007). Personal Transformations: Moving From Violence To Peace. *Special Report 186*. Retrieved from http://origin.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr186.pdf

Haut, F. (1998). Organised crime on wheels: The outlaw motorcycle gang. *Department for the Study of the Contemporary Criminal Menace*. Retrieved from http://www.drmcc.org/download_en.php?dl=41b3a34b81b08.pdf

Hill, T. (1980). Outlaw motorcycle gangs: A look at a new form of organized crime. *Canadian Journal Forum, 3*(1), 26-36.

Hopper, C. B., & Moore, J. (1983). Hell on wheels: The outlaw motorcycle gangs. *The Journal of American Culture, 6*(2), 58-64.

Hopper, C. B., & Moore, J. (2007). Hell on wheels. In A. Veno & K. Sims (Eds.), *The mammoth book on bikers* (pp. 148-159). Philadelphia, PA: Running Press Books Publisher.

Montgomery, R. (1976). The outlaw motorcycle subculture. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Corrections, 19*(4), 356-361.

Quinn, J. F. (1987). Sex roles and hedonism among members of "outlaw" motorcycle clubs. *Deviant Behavior, 8*(1), 47-63.

Quinn, J. F. (2001). Angels, Bandidos, Outlaws, and Pagans: The evolution of organized crime among the big four 1% motorcycle clubs. *Deviant Behavior, 22*(4), 379-399.

Quinn, J. F., & Forsyth, C. J. (2011). The tools, tactics, and mentality of outlaw biker wars. *American Journal of Criminal Justice, 36*(3), 216-230. doi: 10.1007/s12103-011-9107-5

Quinn, J. F., & Koch, D. S. (2003). The nature of criminality within one-percent motorcycle clubs. *Deviant Behavior, 24*, 281-305.

Smith, R. C. (2002). Dangerous motorcycle gangs: A facet of organized crime in the mid atlantic region. *Journal of Gang Research, 9*(4), 33-44.

Taylor, M. (1988). *The terrorist*. London: Brassey's Defence Publishers.

Tretheway, S., & Katz, T. (1998). Motorcycle gangs or motorcycle mafia? *National Alliance of Gang Investigations Association*. Retrieved from http://www.nagia.org/Gang%20Articles/Motorcycle%20Gangs.htm

Watson, J. M. (1980). Outlaw motorcyclists: An outgrowth of lower class cultural concerns. *Deviant Behavior, 4*, 31-48.

Watson, J. M. (1982). Righteousness on two wheels: Bikers as a secular sect. *Sociological Spectrum, 2*, 333-349.

Wolf, D. R. (1991). *The Rebels: A brotherhood of outlaw bikers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Wright, S. A. (1987). *Leaving cults: The dynamics of defection*. Washington, DC: Society for the scientific study of religion.

Yates, B. (2007). Birth of the terror. In A. Veno & K. Sims (Eds.), *The mammoth book of bikers* (pp. 57-73). Philadelphia, PA: Running Press Book Publishers.