The Brotherhood of Bikers

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Introduction
The 1947 American Motorcyclist Association (AMA) sanctioned a rally in Hollister, California, which drew thousands of motor cycle enthusiasts to the small town. Widespread disorder at the event generated media attention with photos of the unkempt, intoxicated biker reaching an international audience and creating the long-lasting image of what is now considered part of the biker identity.

The events in Hollister forged a bond among unemployed World War II veterans who revelled in their underdog status from the AMA’s exclusionary statement which presented 1% of motorcyclists as ‘outlaws’ who did not integrate well into society. After political and social stigma during the 1960s, the Hell’s Angels, Satan’s Slaves, Gypsy Jokers and a number of other small clubs proudly adopted the 1% identity as a badge of honour which unified all the clubs in a brotherhood. Riders adopted the diamond-shaped 1% patch as a symbol of their non-conformity to mainstream values – formally creating a distinctive sub-culture within the motor cycle society.

The Subculture Itself
Descriptions from the 1980s and earlier emphasised biker subculture as an outgrowth of lower class cultural values opposing western middle-class norms; 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 fundamental ideological premise of the ‘brotherhood of bikers’. The bond between members is forged through intense and exclusive membership that emphasises moral, emotional and material interdependence. Unique in their overt display of symbols and the acceptance of social stigma, clubs find amusement in their distinctive, yet marginalised, identity. The social environment of their club is emphasised as the only setting which provides members with sanctuary - ensuring mutual support and reinforcement for cultural norms.

This brotherhood of bikers is the factor that encourages commitment to the club and ensures continued investment in the club’s activities. During recruitment and the patching of members, the brotherhood is emphasised as the one social structure that is dependable and provides a sense of belonging and benevolence between brothers:

“It would be like a group of friends, forming a brotherhood sort of thing. We’ll all stand by each other and no one will ever let me down again in my life. You know, because they’re bound to me more than anything.”

This brotherhood and club identity provides individual members with power. This power is not described in the pejorative sense,
but power as defined by Rollo May as the ability to influence others and achieve significance in interpersonal relationships:

“Well, it gives you a reasonable sense of security I think. You're not afraid to go anywhere or do anything ... it gave you that sense of, you're a lot more confident in yourself and what you do and how you deal with people, if you're involved in something like that. Almost to the extent that you consider yourself better than anybody else, really.”

This social dependency for power encourages members to psychologically invest in the success of the club, leading to the fusion of the club and member's identity. 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. However, under certain conditions commitment to the club can be threatened to the point where significant personal sacrifices will be made in order to leave. The following section will describe the factors that were identified through interviews with former 1% motor cycle club members.

**Patch-Overs**

Unique to the 1% subculture is the practice of ‘patch-overs’ as a method of asserting dominance as well as acquiring territory and regional strength during inter-club conflict. Members of the conquered club are required to hand-over their colours, and usually, re-prospect for the bigger club. These ‘patch-overs’ remove the inter-club boundaries that give each club its distinctive identity. Incoming members may assume the new club’s identity; however, the loss of status and negative interaction can incite intra-club conflict, as well as reduce member identification. Members of the patched-over club are disillusioned by their club’s defeat and subsequent loss of self-esteem which is heightened through the ritual process of displaying the club patch on the ‘colours curtain’ as a trophy.

The patch-over experience by members is described as “…from the top, to the bottom”. As the social bonds with members of the assuming club are undeveloped, interactions do not bring the same level of enjoyment as “they didn’t know you”. The lack of inclusiveness and camaraderie led to the decline in the perceived brotherhood and resulted in the questioning of commitment and sacrifices for club activities. For one interviewee, the reduced attachment caused doubts in the club’s violent methods, confessing he “started to have a conscience” and felt uncomfortable with his involvement.

**Conflicts and Competing Interests**

While patch-overs change the group dynamics, rapid recruitment during expansion can also influence members’ attachment to the club. Chapters tend to be small with strong bonds formed in a tight-knit environment. Introducing younger recruits to operate within the club businesses provides strength if a bikie war should occur. The rapid recruitment of young males during the expansion stage of the club can be detrimental to the brotherhood ethos though. An interviewee described these new recruits as “born-again rich kids”, emphasising the intra-club conflict that came from the generational differences and moderation of hedonism, “because they are young and they don’t know what they’re doing mate. They just think because they’ve got a patch on their back they’ve got a little bit of power”. While mature members are acutely aware that deviant behaviours bring unwanted attention, young impulsive members can create a fanatical environment that stresses the need for club dominance.
The member to measure himself on. For example, Mark began club norms by providing a new set of norms and standards for New relationships can play a significant role in the questioning of the overtly masculine culture.6

The conflict between members can reduce identification, as this interviewee attests:

“I didn’t realise there would be so many dickheads; you know, a lot of idiots, mate. I don’t like them. I don’t like some of the people in the club, so like how am I supposed to have this passion for this club when I don’t even like half the people in it mate.”

Rapid recruitment and the increased involvement of non-patched members during inter-club power struggles can increase the risk of fragmentation and also dilute the distinctiveness and exclusivity of the club identity.

In addition to the negative club environment, external relationships that grow in personal significance can threaten the commitment to the club’s activities. The time and resources invested in the club ultimately impact on other areas of the members’ lives and when outside relationships grow in personal significance the club must compete for dominance. This can include a shift in friendship networks or romantic relationships:

“I met my wife and um, 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 recognised as a significant threat to membership, as such, the role of women is tempered by the overtly masculine culture.5

New relationships can play a significant role in the questioning of club norms by providing a new set of norms and standards for the member to measure himself on. For example, Mark began regular martial arts training and adopted the norms of his new training associates. His commitment to training reduced his involvement in the drug scene and he began questioning the moral aspects of his role as a “debt-collector that doesn’t collect any debt”.

Law Enforcement

Interestingly, outside threats such as law enforcement can work in two ways; cause the club to fragment under pressure, or conversely, increase the cohesiveness of the club by strengthening the ‘us against them’ mentality. Police pressure can be effective in removing individual members from the club environment but does not always affect emotional attachment to the club. For example: Chris’ positive attachment towards his brothers is demonstrated by leaving 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 jeopardise club loyalty, he turned down the alleged offering of $15,000 to provide information, sold everything he owned and left the state quickly.

The benefits of leaving in a positive light cannot be understated in this sub-culture. Members who leave while maintaining respect may have the option of returning in a social capacity and do not fear reprisals from the club. However, former members still stress that leaving comes at a price of ‘losing everything you have’ through ending relationships, selling all assets and investments then disappearing, or relinquishing everything to the club. In addition to the costs imposed by the club, ex-members must also manage the loss of reputation and protection, as well as the loss of power with a marginal position following the exit. For many members involvement remains highly likely as the cycle of sociopsychological investments during membership strengthens identification and the cost of leaving remains high.

2 Quotes taken from a PhD study that included interviews with former one percent motorcycle club members. Names have been changed to protect participants. Further insight to the study is given at http://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=act
4 The use of the term 1% motor cycle clubs in this paper is deliberate as it reflects those who have adopted the 1% ethos from the AMA rejection and avoids the media and law enforcement endorsed term, outlaw motor cycle gangs. This is done for several reasons; (1) the term outlaw, whilst often used to differentiate between mainstream and 1% motor cycle clubs, is also the name of an international ‘big four’ motor cycle club that is frequently associated with criminality; the Outlaws Motor Cycle Club; (2) 1% motor cycle clubs are not representative of the sociological definitions of a gang as the clubs have a formally organised structure that includes weekly meetings, clubhouses, dues, elections and officers or formal constitutions, rather than the informal gang networks; (3) this term is preferred by those involved in the sub-culture who insist the term gang is used by law enforcement and media to incite a moral panic.