

Older Motorcyclists and Road Safety Education: An Australian context

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Abstract

This paper contains a critical review of the research related to the role of older motorcyclists in road safety education, Australia. It also includes a discussion of the literature focused on the topic of ageing; specifically, older riders and later life learners. The importance of including the shared lived experiences of older people cannot be underestimated in its value towards current road safety education and the broader community in this field. Further research could illuminate the benefits of later life learning in a rider training context and the utilization of the wisdom and experience of older riders towards community road safety education.

Keywords: Road safety education, Older people, Motorcyclist, Ageism

1. Introduction

The Australian population has experienced an increasingly ageing profile in recent years. For example, one quarter of the population is now aged over 55 years (ABS, 2011), and the number of people aged over 65 years is expected to double by 2055 (Comm. Govt., 2015). “Australians are swapping cars and congestion for the ease and exhilaration of motorbikes in big numbers, driving the ranks of motorbike and scooter riders towards the million mark” (Low, 2015).

The motorcycling age of the population has also increased in line with this trend (Milthorpe,&Raimond, 2010). The average motorcycle rider is 43.2 years and male (87%). Sixty-three percent of motorcycle riders are over 40 years, and 13.4% aged 60+ years old (de Rome et al., 2013). In contrast the profile of new car drivers consists of 80% aged between 18-25 in NSW (RTA, 2010). Traditional trends show that older riders were least likely to have crashed, whereas 23% of young riders had at least one crash in the past 3 years (de Rome et al., 2013). Whereas in 2007 the average age of a fatally injured motorcyclist was 36 years of age, in 2017 it was 40 years (BITRE, 2017). However,

Since 2005, the number of older licensed motorbike riders aged 50 to 85 plus has risen more than 90 per cent to 302,066 in 2017. Older riders now account for half the motorbike riding population in NSW. There has also been a 207 per cent increase in riders 65 to 69, and a 196 per cent increase for 70 to 74-year-olds (Power, 2017).

Combined with increased numbers of the riding population including ‘returning riders’, the driving environment is generally more crowded and hazardous than what would have been encountered during the older rider’s early experiences of learning to ride a motorcycle. “Injuries are likely to occur because older riders are returning after a long time off — or are taking it up for the first time” (Mayoh, 2018).

The bulk of related education programs have largely targeted younger people through schools and youth clubs. In NSW, the older driver licensing system has been designed to “balance the safety of road users and the general community, with the continuing independence and mobility of older drivers”. However, road safety programs are largely missing from the adult education field. As road users in general age, they are furthest away from their prior learning experiences, usually gained in early adulthood.

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As the greater part of an older rider's life has been spent without any compulsory road safety education, such as a riding test or logged trainee hours, it is timely for determining what research has been being conducted, if any, into road safety education for older adults and if the potential exists for the experiences of these older motorcyclists to be used in helping educate the broader riding community.

Further, access to motorcycling may be considered a human rights issue in terms of combating social isolation, restricted mobility and ageist stereotypes, combined with making a difference to the quality of lives of older Australians (AHRC, 2019):

"You are a long time dead. You can't do much after so enjoy it while you can," said David Williams, 69, explaining why he returned to motorbike riding in his late 40s to relieve the stress of a high-powered job (Power, 2017).

As fulfilling a productive life stage, older age should provide people with the opportunities to live healthy, positive and productive lives, connected to and participating in the life of the community.

2. Research on Road Safety and Older Motorcyclists

Mulvihill and Haworth (2006) conducted a research project in which they found that the most effective way of preventing motorcycle crashes in older riders was the implementation of a graduated licensing scheme, which would reduce the amount of exposure to riders in high risk situations. A graduated licensing scheme has since been introduced by the NSW government but only to those new riders that are obtaining licenses. It does not address any older riders that are either continuing or returning to riding after a long absence, except over 85 years of age.

The research ran from February until mid-June 2005, and included either an online or paper questionnaire. Responses were voluntary and a combined total of 1518 completed the questionnaire. The research paradigm used was post-positivist and dominated by quantitative methodologies, such as categorizing crash involvement and riders involved. This is a typical epistemological approach to post-positivist research whereby the researcher remains as neutral as possible to prevent values or biases influencing the work by following prescribed procedures rigorously (Mertens, 2009). Mulvihill and Haworth (2006) similarly attempted to place riders into groups, with each group having very distinct characteristics. These included marital status, employment status, and reason for riding, to name a few. This research concluded that training courses may even be detrimental to rider safety, yet made no attempt to investigate what kind of education would make a difference.

In contrast to this research, qualitative research conducted in the UK suggested instead that road safety education forms part of the health and wellbeing of the larger community and more resources and priorities are required (MVA Consultancy, 2009). The interpretivist research utilized a more personal, interactive mode of data collection, designing two questionnaires and holding workshops for community and government stakeholders. The study recommended that older adults be included in relevant community road safety education programs. As typical of an interpretivist epistemology, this approach involves others in the process, providing access to richer information. Thinking of the issues in question, though, it still didn't go far enough to influence communities and government in the issues of road safety education for older riders and their experiences.

Although not specifically targeting ageing motorcycle riders, Rowden, Watson and Haworth (2012) discussed in their study whether rider training programs are effective in educating trainee riders in risk taking behaviours. They believed there was a need for training available in the community promoting safer riding to reduce subsequent risk taking (Rowden et al., 2012). This means that although rider training and education is effective at training physical handling skills to riders in the early stages of riding, more attention is required for training in reducing the amount of risk-taking by riders and other decision management strategies.

The method of data collection they used was via a paper questionnaire administered to course participants by instructors at the conclusion of the training course. The findings of the survey indicated that most course graduates were not only adopting safe riding practice but two years after the training were maintaining these safer habits. The flaw with this reporting is that graduates at the conclusion of training courses are "tuned in" to thinking about low risk habits and safe riding practices. Often, by the time a graduate has obtained their licence and is riding their own motorcycle, too much time has elapsed for them to be able to recall what those habits were and effectively apply them to their own riding. Pithers (1998, p.32) confirmed this when he concluded:

Learning is usually...a cumulative process which can occur relatively slowly, especially when an individual is engaged in learning new skills or knowledge that requires a fair amount of practice.

How this applies to the motorcycle rider training context is that a training course introduces the trainee rider to the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to learn to ride. This is the intent behind a learner licence or permit. The learning process, which necessarily, albeit not ideally, occurs without supervision, takes place sometime after the initial training course. This gap between formal training and practice means that some drop off knowledge and skill is inevitable. The well-intentioned graduate from the rider training course survey, has, very often, by the time they commence riding, forgotten the principles of low risk riding. Indeed, it is arguable that they ever truly learned it in the first instance.

Broadley and Hawkins (2008) reported that motorcycle registrations across Australia have increased at a faster rate than any other vehicle type. They also stated that crashes amongst riders over 44 years have also trended upwards, conceding, "It is unknown whether the recent increases in older rider crashes are related to increased exposure (more riders travelling more kilometers), skill deficits (associated with ageing or from taking long breaks from riding before returning to riding (later in life), increased risk taking, psychological or environmental factors" (Broadley, & Hawkins, 2008, p.1).

A random sample focused on riders' self-reported behaviours explored topics such as clothing, group riding and risk perceptions. Broadley and Hawkins (2008) were critical of some of the responses they received, especially regarding individual risk perceptions. Indeed, the responses indicate a dissonance between what riders say and what riders do. Most older riders, as indicated in the report, have generally positive attitudes towards low risk riding but their perceptions of risk may be ill informed or underestimated. Bearing in mind that most riders over 50 have not been exposed to compulsory training, the ability to manage risk depends on the riders' ability to interpret risk in the first place.

A rider that has not had a crash at an intersection, for example, may be aware that intersections can be dangerous places but their experience at intersections has never been negative. Their cognitive processes almost certainly will not recognise an intersection as a risk and they consequently are unlikely to change their riding to manage the risk on the approach (Knight, 2010) Although a rider's experience is a valuable asset and can be used effectively, the importance of educating riders cannot be underestimated. The education process will need to acknowledge the experience of riders and the most effective methods of later life learning, sometimes called geragogy, as well as contributing to the community in some positive way.

Motorcycle Rider Training has been established in New South Wales (NSW) since 1987, with compulsory training being introduced for novice and learner riders in 1992. It was initially introduced to reduce the likelihood of inexperienced riders crashing due to a lack of physical control skills. The intent of the training was to reduce the social and economic costs to the community when motorcyclists crashed.

Over time the scheme has developed to include 2 compulsory training courses, one riding test and an instructor training program. The training utilises adult learning and assessment principles that are based in vocational education. At its base the training is designed for participants aged between 18 – 30 years of age; the most common age for licence applicants. The training now incorporates risk management principles as well as physical skill training. As the Australian population ages, a different approach to training is necessary, however redesigning the rider training scheme is cost prohibitive and from a policy perspective, impractical.

Some years ago, a graduated licensing scheme was introduced into NSW, whereby, novice and learner riders progress through a graduated, compulsory training and testing scheme. This is considered by some to be one of the most effective ways in preventing crashes in motorcycle riders, in that it reduces the amount of exposure to riders in high-risk situations (Mulvihill, & Haworth, 2006). This scheme does not, however, address older, continuing riders, or riders that have returned to riding after a long absence. Although Rider Training may have some benefit to new riders, especially those up to 25-35 years of age, the NSW Government reports that novice riders over 35 years are more likely to require additional remedial training to achieve the educational outcomes than younger riders (Service NSW, 2019). This is arguably due to the training scheme content utilizing education, training and assessment principles that do not consider those of the population that are in their later life and who may require a different approach to learning and education (Matwijiw, 2010).

3. Ageism and Learning

The fact that the world's population, particularly the western world, is ageing is beyond doubt. The United Nations (UN) predict that the number of people aged over 60 years is expected to rise from 737 million to 2 billion by 2050 (UN, 2015). With the proliferation of nursing homes and retirement villages, as well as the way western society views the ageing and elderly, as a group of people not especially useful in society, it's as if the ageing population has become a sub culture of Australian society. Older people commonly despair at feeling excluded, disrespected, and being expected to decline, disappear and not be as active in society (Riggs, 2004). Some older people resist this notion and wish to retain a sense of freedom and independence. Some evidence suggests that emotional wellbeing, and in some cases, memory and some physical ability may increase with age unless the older person is experiencing some major health issue or disadvantage (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). Depression and suicide rates for people over 80 are alarming with males over 80 having the highest suicide rate out of the total Australian population (AIHW, 2015).

Nelson (2004) believes that ageism is pervading all cultural and geographic domains and a more realistic approach needs to be taken by governments. The Australian Government has committed resources to help combat ageism and promote productive ageing (AIHW, 2014). Accordingly, Narushima, Liu and Diestelkamp (2018) concluded that older adults' participation in society is independently and positively associated with their psychological wellbeing, allowing them to be autonomous and fulfilled in their every-day life. Three benefits of later life learning include (a) Economic; suggesting that the acquisition of skills and qualifications have the potential to increase employability and wages as well as increased financial literacy and knowledge, (b) Social; as it facilitates connections with others with similar interests and can create social networks outside the workplace, and (c) Health; providing the possibility of improved knowledge, behaviours, exercise, wellbeing and mental health (Lamont & Sargent-Cox, 2017).

Lear's (2013) research resonates with our proposition of healthy, active ageing through safe motorcycle behaviours:

...[to] discuss ... the power of local and experiential knowledge, civic engagement and social transformation on rural third age women's learning (p.376).

Lear (2013) applied a Heuristic Inquiry methodology to her research. Introducing herself as a third age, female, educator, living in rural Australia, Lear reminds the reader that despite few formal learning resources available in rural communities, "...they are rich in opportunities for informal and non-formal learning in family and community interactions" (p.382). She described midlife adults and rural people learning through experience, community participation and social interaction. As Ellis (2013) plus Findsen and Formosa (2011) have highlighted, "For older adult learning to be effective, the learning experience must take advantage of the extensive experience of older learners" (Findsen, & Formosa, 2011, p.108).

4. Conclusion

Somewhat disappointingly, road safety research generally uses a positivist approach and quantitative methodologies to reveal accident statistics and conclusions are chiefly drawn by "number crunching." The qualitative research that does exist, appears in the main to include self-reporting surveys, which have the potential to be unreliable. These approaches, not poor or wrong in themselves, would benefit from different strategies being utilised. Future investigations may capture older rider's experiences from an educational perspective for the benefit of others, as well as identifying learning opportunities.

The existing road safety research and educational programs, targeting motorcycle riders and influencing government policy, are likely to be ineffective when used in isolation. Educational professionals and teachers can enhance these programs and policies by working alongside the individuals within the motorcycling community, with many accumulated years of riding experiences. Educational programs can be effectively developed from this research, which enables these older riders to understand the benefit of their experiences and the learning opportunities created by them. A common motivating factor for older adult learners was to use their experience to help others. If older university students and women living in rural Australia can influence their communities for the better, certainly, older men and women in the motorcycling community can do the same thing; provided they're given the chance.

It is imperative, as a matter of social justice and enabling people to reach their potential as individuals and as responsible citizens, that inclusion of older people through motorcycling be facilitated. Adults can learn through experience; all experience is valuable for learning and motorcycling experiences are no exception.

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