Violent mobilities: men, masculinities and road conflicts in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on violence(s) in traffic space as a gendered problem. It draws upon qualitative online studies and interviews with cyclists about their experiences of motorists’ violent practices, including cyclists’ negotiations of anti-cyclist discourses and their coping strategies. It is argued that automobility makes it possible for certain men to perform their ‘right to the road,’ including gender-identity-shaping practices, and that this has the negative effect of violating cyclists’ bodily integrity. It follows that a shift from cars to more sustainable mobilities also demands related shifts in masculinities and men’s practices in the context of transport and traffic.

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Introduction

Currently, in Sweden, getting more people onto bikes and improving the conditions for cycling is the focus of considerable political and public attention. Sweden is a country where cycling is common and ‘normalized,’ at least when compared to countries such as the USA or the UK (Pooley 2013, 42). However, many urban policymakers agree that Swedish cities would benefit from increasing the proportion of cycle mobility (SKL 2015). One such city is Stockholm. Stockholm is aiming to become as good for cyclists as Copenhagen and Amsterdam, and by doing so to increase the proportion of cyclists from the current 7–8 percent to 15 percent by 2030 (Pirttisalo 2015). However, with more ‘pro-cycling’ discourses and more cyclists taking up road space in recent years, conflicts and tensions between different road users appear to have become an increasing problem in both Stockholm and rural areas of Sweden – at least if media coverage is accurate. Such media representations concern debates about so-called ‘cycling hate’ (Kronqvist 2013) and reports about cyclists being injured by (male) drivers (Nordell 2017).

In societies where attempts are being made to move away from car use in favour of more sustainable modes of transport, it seems increasingly important not only to study such conflicts, but also to consider violence(s) in traffic space as a gendered problem. Gender may be conceptualized as a culturally constructed power order that is linked to the perceived differences between women and men, including ideas and notions about femininity and masculinity (Connell 2002). The processes that define gender need to be understood as context dependent and intersecting with other social hierarchies, such as those related to class, sexuality, ethnicity, able-bodiedness and age (Hanson 2010). Gender processes are not only intersectional and contextual, but they are ‘done’ through everyday practices related to transport and mobility (Pratt and Hanson 1994; in Hanson 2010). For example, in Sweden, men do 70 percent of the driving, but make up 88 percent of those prosecuted for traffic violations (Trafikanalys 2015). In part, this can be explained by the fact that...
men tend to spend more time in traffic compared to women (Trafikanalys 2015), and in part it may be due to the material effects of gendered structures that reproduce the investment of masculinity in risky driving practices (Redshaw 2008, 94).

While it is well known that it is more often men than women who cause collisions, injuries and the deaths of other road users, it is less common to analyse cyclists’ fear, annoyance and experiences of violence in traffic in the context of men, masculinities and violence. Fear, and what creates fear, can be a highly subjective matter. The material on which this study is based foremost reflects cyclists’ first-hand experiences of fear and vulnerability and the power relations that are reflected in this fear. Previous studies suggest that what causes the greatest fear among cyclists is co-existing with motorized traffic which “[does] not, or would not account sufficiently for their vulnerabilities as a cyclist’ (Pooley 2013, 145, 147). Apart from cyclists having to negotiate ‘the disproportionate ability of drivers to cause harm,’ fear may also emanate from facing structural and individual discrimination against cyclists based on social identities such as gender and race (Goddard 2016, 102, 103). Violent experiences need further investigation since insecurity in traffic may reduce people’s willingness to cycle (Aldred and Crosewer 2015; Jacobsen, Racioppi, and Rutter 2009). In light of this, not only is bike safety an important condition for achieving sustainable mobility, but in achieving such goals it is equally important to problematize links between men, masculinities and violent mobilities as possible obstacles to achieving shifts in mobility patterns.

Here, as I will go on to argue, cyclists’ experiences of vulnerability and insecurity in traffic space are problems that are not only interlinked with urban planning and bike-friendly infrastructure (Koglin 2013; Parkin 2012), or with the automobility regime marginalizing cyclists (Böm et al. 2006), but also performances of masculinity and risk-taking with motor vehicles (cf. Jain 2005; Joelsson 2013; Redshaw 2008). This not only includes recognizing violence directed towards cyclists as a problem and explicitly gendering the doers of violent mobilities, but it is also important to be sensitive to overlapping hierarchies that complicate a dichotomous gender analysis of road conflicts. Against this background, the study aims to understand road conflicts and violations of cyclists’ bodily integrity from a gender and violence perspective, and will therefore contribute to mobilities research with debates on violence in traffic space as a gendered problem. What can be learned about men and masculinities in the context of the harassing and violent driving practices that cyclists experience? How do cyclists problematize, explain and cope with such experiences? In the following, after having contextualized the study in relation to previous research and the Swedish context, I map out the theoretical backdrop guiding the analysis, followed by an analysis of cyclists’ experiences of violent mobilities and a concluding discussion.

Previous research

The literature on sustainable transport has focused on how best to plan for and reduce the use of cars while promoting more energy-efficient modes of transport such as cycling, including making cycling safer, more attractive and more accessible (Banister 2005; in Parkin 2012; 8). More particularly, research on cycling and sustainability reveals the positive impacts of cycling compared to motor traffic. For example, it produces no greenhouse gases, noise or emissions and causes few accidents while taking up little space either when parked or in use (Börjesson and Eliasson 2012, 248). However, as Parkin (2012) points out, cycling is not only ‘used’, but also ‘experienced’ – the sights, smells and sounds all add to the experiences of the rider – including experiences of violent and aggressive acts in traffic.

Violent acts on the roads have attracted scholarly attention since the 1970s (Lupton 2002). Previous studies have argued that the merging of boundaries between human bodies and car bodies into hybridized embodiment make up an important key for understanding violence and aggression in traffic; as in producing an assumed privilege to perform aggressive driving (Lupton 1999, 2002; Katz 1999), or distancing drivers from other road users (Nixon 2014, 93). Aggressive driving, traffic offending and ‘road rage’ have been analysed as a gendered problem in several
studies; as having to do with drivers’ inflated sense of self, including men’s stronger sense of entitlement (Shreer 2002, 339); and that men more often than women are inclined to status defence and identity enhancement (Harding et al. 1998). Men are also inclined to react significantly more strongly compared to women when faced with other road users’ anger-provoking driving (Parker, Lajanen, and Summala 2002, 235). However, studies also argue that a stressful lifestyle may influence driving to such an extent that gender differences in levels of offending may even be levelled out (Simon and Corbett 1996). Shinar and Compton (2004) note that, even though women can be as aggressive as men, gender differences are greater for riskier and more aggressive behaviours. While men’s status defence or enhancement have been suggested to be central issues in explaining male-male stranger violence in general, previous studies have highlighted the implications of stress, disinhibition and the dehumanizing anonymity afforded by the motor car acting together, adding caution to simplified assumptions about reckless masculinity (Harding et al. 1998, 236).

Recent scholarly research on road conflicts involving cyclists focuses both on countries known for a comparably lower prevalence of cycling, such as the UK, Canada or the USA (Aldred and Crosweller 2015; Fincham 2006; Furness 2010; Heesch, Sahlqvist, and Garrard 2011; Horton 2007; Jones 2005; Jungnickel and Aldred 2013; McCarthy 2011; Nixon 2014; Skinner and Rosen 2007; Walker 2007), and on those with a comparatively high prevalence, such as Denmark and Sweden (Freudendal-Pedersen 2015; Koglin 2013). Studies on cycling and urban conflict in Denmark and Sweden have focused less on gender and more on struggles over city space. Drawing on Bauman’s (1999) understanding of space as inherently social, disorder and ‘space wars’ over road space have been analysed with regard to cyclists and car drivers (Koglin 2013). Freudendal-Pedersen (2015) notes that intra-modal conflicts between cyclists can be partially explained by a number of interrelated factors: from cyclists not following the unwritten rules on how to safely use bike lanes, to congestion in bike lanes and a mixture of faster and slower cyclists sharing lanes. Following this line of thought, ‘space war’ is not only a problem for cities with a low prevalence of cycling; ‘bike friendly’ cities like Copenhagen and Stockholm are also troubled by fights between cyclists and drivers (Freudendal-Pedersen 2015, 46; Koglin 2013, 157). Such conflicts, as I will discuss, are gendered in complex ways.

A number of studies address the intersections between gender and cycling experiences, including how the willingness to cycle is gendered. The Near Miss Project maps out the occurrence of non-injury incidents among cyclists in the UK (Aldred and Crosweller 2015). This study describes near-miss incidents as an ‘everyday’ occurrence and that women, who more often than men make shorter and slower trips, reported 50 percent more problematic passing incidents than did men (Aldred and Crosweller 2015, 383, 387). These findings could be compared with Walker (2007), who concludes that cars pass women cyclists with more clearance than male cyclists. His research was based on him wearing a blonde wig to communicate to drivers that he was a woman, while Aldred and Crosweller’s study relied on women’s and men’s reported experiences. While women in several European countries (such as Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany) ride bicycles (nearly) as much as do men (Pucher and Buehler 2008), women’s comparably lower rate of cycling in other countries can be related to risk aversion and lack of safe infrastructure (Emond, Tang, and Handy 2009). However, domestic and care responsibilities also influence uptake (Bonham and Wilson 2012), as do norms associated with respectable femininity, motherhood and embodiment (Aldred 2013; Steinbach et al. 2011).

Whilst previous research emphasizes the auto-centred and gendered travelling environment as keys for understanding how conflicts between different road users are produced, the present study adds to this body of knowledge by giving a qualitative account of how road conflicts are gendered in a relatively ‘bike-friendly’ context such as Sweden. Historically, traffic planners in Sweden have struggled with a legacy within which traffic engineers and urban planners have marginalized cycling, prioritizing the car and thereby reproducing its dominance over other means of mobility (Emanuel 2012; Koglin 2013; Koglin and Rye 2014). For example, Stockholm has devoted less space
to cycling compared to Copenhagen, which in turn shapes the power relations in urban space in ways that do not favour cycling (Koglin and Rye 2014, 220). However, the proportion of Stockholm cyclists has increased due to upgraded cycling infrastructure and other factors, such as crowding on public transport and road congestion (Börjesson and Eliasson 2012).

**Theorizing violent mobilities**

As members of society, we all have to relate to violence – as people who use violence, talk about violence, respond to violence, or as potential victims of violence (Hearn 1998). Studies of auto-mobility have to only a limited extent explored the violent effects of automobility, and the many ways that motor vehicles can be dangerous and threatening, and even less so with an explicit focus on men and masculinities (Joelsson 2013). Violent mobilities need to be seen in the light of a pervasive regime of automobility, a concept that identifies one of the most important contemporary socio-technical institutions, namely the car, as an ideological and discursive formation (Featherstone 2004). It has been suggested that automobility can be perceived as a regime that affords both mobility and immobility, thus recognizing the naturalized and normalized character of social and political relations that legitimize some forms of automobility, and marginalize others (Böhme et al. 2006, 3). Cycling, driving and walking represent different mobilities, rhythms and speeds, which are differently situated in relation to power and transport hierarchies (Spinney 2010). Automobility produces both subordinated and privileged positions within the automobilic system, positioning cyclists on the ‘outside’, while drivers remain ‘insiders’ (Aldred 2010; McCarthy 2011).

Violent mobilities, in their varied forms and expressions, are intersectionally gendered and need to be analysed as tightly interlinked with the current automobility regime, which prioritizes motorized mobilities in planning and practice (cf. Koglin 2013; Koglin and Rye 2014; Nixon 2014; Spinney 2010). How people move and how they relate to technologies of movement are gendered issues that contribute to the production, reproduction and contestation of gender itself, including gendered power hierarchies (Uteng and Cresswell 2008, 2). A number of studies have shown that, even though both men and women drive cars, car travel and the ideas of freedom and movement associated with the car are persistently linked to a masculine domain and masculine identity (Balkmar 2012; Mellström 2004; Redshaw 2008). Cars, car driving and identity formation through cars show how constructions of masculinity are closely tied to power, embodiment, movement, space and representation (Uteng and Cresswell 2008).

Redshaw (2008, 121) argues that the car assists in embodying aspects of western culture based on ‘individualism and getting ahead’, an aggressive means of achieving mobility at the expense of others. This form of risk-taking is closely linked to masculinity, automobility and space, more particularly, a form of masculinity she refers to as combustion masculinity: ‘the dominant standard of driving where the aggressive and competitive demonstration and exercise of car handling skill is given prominence over caution’ (Redshaw 2008, 80). Hence, driving is not only interlinked with masculinity in the ways in which it is power-pursuing. Risk-taking with motor vehicles in public space also entails tendencies to disregard the consequences and effects of dangerous road practices – which can be understood in terms of lack of responsibility and lack of care, including so-called carefree masculinities (Hanlon 2012) and constructions of careless men (Joelsson 2013). However, as more energy-efficient modes of transport (for example, cycling) are called for, there follow more ‘ecomodern’ forms of men and masculinities, within which questions of sustainable mobility are much more integrated into the concept of masculinity, mobility practices and modernity (Hultman 2013).

Violent mobilities do not only include directly violent practices, but also so-called near-misses and related incidents that informants describe as frightening, annoying and/or as violent acts in traffic space (cf. Aldred and Croswell 2015). One way of approaching such experiences is to view risk-taking with motor vehicles in public space as a form of violence. Joelsson (2013, 218) refers to risk-taking with motor vehicles in public space ‘as part of sociocultural scripts of
violence, with gendered associations and implications’. Through this definition, the violent character of the automobility regime can also be addressed. Such a perspective relates to how violence and violations can be perceived as a resource for doing masculinity in the context of the automobilic system. As argued by Jain (2005), automotive technology, cultural notions of masculinity and gendered violence are interlinked in ways that tend to naturalize and render invisible such gendered violence in policy and in the history of the automobile. Hence, the complexity of technology’s role in mobility practices encompasses not only the brute power afforded by the car to threaten others (Dery 2006), but also the sorts of driving practices that may or may not be perceived as aggressive by others (Parker, Lajunen, and Summala 2002, 229). As suggested by Nixon (2014), driving may increase a sense of disconnection between drivers and the social environments outside the car, with intermodal conflicts being one of the potential effects.

Following this idea, I draw on Hearn and Parkin (2001, 18) broad, socially contextualized understanding of violence, in which it is not reduced to intentional physical violence, but defined as actions, structures and events that violate or cause violation or are considered as violating. Importantly, that which is perceived by cyclists as violating their safety may encompass a whole range of experiences and emotional distress that might not be acknowledged as such in policy, within traffic regulations or by drivers themselves. This view stems from an understanding of violence as bound to dominant discourses that construct some violent practices as legitimate and others as illegitimate (Joelsson 2013, 51; Tyner 2012). The process of the legitimation of violence is connected to the conceptions of places and bodies, including what bodies are considered ‘out of place’ or ‘in place’; ‘illegitimate’ or ‘legitimate’ bodies (Joelsson 2013, 51). Hence, violent mobilities need to be articulated as a continuum between intentional and unintentional violence, from being entrenched in how the automobility regime generates certain inequalities and vulnerabilities for cyclists in car-dominated spaces, to explicit (violent and aggressive) demonstrations of power and domination by individual drivers. This multi-sidedness is important for understanding the complexity of gender and power in relation to technology and sociotechnical systems more generally, and the relations between men, masculinities and violence in the context of traffic hierarchies and space in particular.

Material and methods

The main material upon which this analysis is based consists of ethnographic Internet studies and in-depth interviews with cyclists. The interviewees were selected to include a cross-section of different types of cyclists, from everyday commuters to very experienced long-distance leisure cyclists.

The in-depth interviews encompass five women and five men and focus on their cycling experiences, primarily in Stockholm, but also in the middle-sized city of Linköping (three of the men). It should be mentioned that, even though both cities aspire to be perceived as cycling cities, it is primarily Stockholm that informants and media representations associate with considerable conflict between cyclists and other road users. The majority of informants are commuters, but several also engage in leisure cycling at weekends. Two of the women and four of the men are experienced leisure cyclists, two of the men and two of the women also identify themselves as bike advocates/activists. Informants were aged between 23 and 55 years old, mainly from the ethnic Swedish population, with middle-class jobs. This means that the interviews do not include many non-representative groups of cyclists. All interviews except one, which was conducted in 2007, took place in 2014–2015. They were conducted in the informant’s home or office, or via Skype/telephone and lasted between one and 2.5 h. The issue of violence was addressed by asking informants whether they could talk about specific occasions they relate to as having been particularly scary, risky or violent, including describing what happened, how they dealt with the situation and possible strategies for avoiding similar situations.
The material for the Internet study was gathered from three Swedish online cycling forums: Happymtb.org, which is Sweden’s largest cycling community (270 000 unique visitors/month, since 2016 renamed Happyride.se), Cykelforum.se (no data on members available online) and Funbeat.se (100 000 unique visitors/week). The discussions chosen for this particular study emanate from someone presenting herself as a researcher posting a call to members of the three forums, and asking them to describe and comment on the question; ‘how are cyclists treated in Sweden?’ The researcher suggested that cyclists are vulnerable and physically disadvantaged compared to motorists, and asked for the forum participants’ views, experiences and observations. Most contributors to the threads identified themselves as cyclists, while a few also identified as motorists.

In total, the call generated 142 responses (out of which nine were from the researcher, November 2014). In total, the threads produced 16 475 words (out of which 1099 were from the researcher). In total, the threads produced 16 475 words (out of which 1099 were from the researcher). The respondents mostly replied to each other but also directly to the researcher. In the material only four gave positive examples; 38 gave negative examples. Ten gave both negative and positive examples (e.g. ‘not all car drivers behave badly, but some do’). The vast majority (81) did not explicitly share their own experiences; instead they discussed and problematized cyclists’ situation with an attempt to understand the reasons behind road conflicts. None of the contributors explicitly expressed that male drivers were worse than female drivers or vice versa (even though comments about male drivers occurred, as discussed below). Comments on different types of drivers were made about bus drivers (2), taxi drivers (2), and worker van drivers (2), as generally worse drivers compared to the average driver.

It is likely that those represented in the forums are more experienced leisure cyclists or commuters than the average cyclist. The contributors based in Stockholm were in general more critical of the current situation compared to those cycling in smaller cities, including cities with purpose-built cycling infrastructure. It is therefore likely that the results are less generalizable to cycling outside Stockholm or other larger cities. Ethically, it can be difficult to distinguish between private and public information online. Contributors to public forums, whose posts are made accessible to everybody, may not have considered that their statements – sometimes sensitive in character – could be spread further by researchers (NESH 2003/2010). However, even though the material used may reflect personal thoughts and experiences, it can be argued that it is not strictly private, especially since the contributors had all responded to a call stating that the material would be used for research.

During the analytical process, the material was read to establish what signifies the ways in which cyclists make sense of road conflicts. During these readings, I paid particular attention to power relations between motorists and cyclists (the most prevalent area of conflict in the material), remaining sensitive to nuances and contradictions. I noted themes of importance, such as unequal power relations, experiences of demonstrations of power, vulnerability and violence, including explanations and coping strategies. The material was then divided into themes around what cyclists bring up as harassing/violent driving practices and how cyclists problematize, explain and negotiate such experiences, including their coping strategies. Within each of these dimensions, I considered the relations between intersectional gender and violent mobilities, including how informants discuss the cyclist’s position in a car-dominant society. While informants and contributors to online communities may well not refer to violence explicitly, they may describe incidents that I as an analyst would identify as a form of violence or as violating their bodily integrity.

**Experiences of violent road conflicts**

Violence and aggression against cyclists can take many expressions. In the following, I discuss what cyclists bring up as harassing/violent driving practices and how these relate to men, masculinities and (motor) vehicles. The following excerpt addresses a common theme in the online discussions:
I have been pushed off the road, been hit on purpose, and cars that have passed then braked suddenly. Countless times I have got windscreen washer fluid on me and also had things thrown at me. (Happymtb.org)

According to the material at hand, the aggressive driving here exemplified is a problem to which many cyclists could relate – in particular leisure cyclists. Such actions may not result in physical injury but may in themselves be experienced as both frightening and violent to a vulnerable cyclist’s body (Lugo 2013). These are experiences that can be viewed in the context of ‘battles’ over who is a legitimate road user and who is not (Spinney 2010, 114):

When the cyclist shows up on the motorist’s playing field, then the motorist reacts and expresses dissatisfaction through demonstrations of power. Drive too close, hail, spray windscreen fluid, horn, point, shout, flash their lights, and suddenly brake in front of you, stop. (Happymtb.org)

To this contributor and many others, it seems clear that cyclists are perceived as being in the way and not being entitled to use the road. This lack of right to the road is, according to this forum member, reflected in the so called ‘bikeway law’, a Swedish law that makes it obligatory for cyclists to use the bikeway if such exists, and not the general traffic lane¹. Hence, for cyclists who prefer to use the general traffic lane (e.g. faster leisure cyclists who do not want to share bikeways with slower cyclists for reasons of safety), such a law may lead to aggressive responses from drivers to the perceived infringement of the cyclist on to the ‘motorist’s playing field’. This contributor argues that bikeways privilege motor vehicles by denying cyclists their right to the road. Such an argument contrasts against what is generally argued as the benefits of bikeways, namely that they effectively contribute to reducing deterrents to more cycling and thus reduce cycling fatalities (Pucher and Buehler 2017, 690). These examples also relate to Redshaw’s (2008, 121) argument that the car, as dangerous and threatening technology, assists in embodying aggressive means of achieving mobility at the expense of others, a form of risk-taking that is closely linked to masculinity, automobility and space (Redshaw 2008). Such conflicts can be experienced as outright violence, as one of the online contributors put it:

Without blinking, he meant to crush me against the curb with the right side of his car if I did not stop. (Cykelforum.se)

These experiences illustrate some of the violent practices that, from a cyclist’s perspective, can be interpreted as demonstrations of power, as mentioned above, about who legitimately belongs on the road, and who does not. As in this example, where Richard talks about a situation when he claimed his space as a cyclist:

There was this one time with [name of taxi company], I pointed out they had parked in the cycling lane and the driver went totally crazy and chased me through the city centre as in a car chase kind of way. […] He drove through red lights and beeped all the way. I had a bike so I could take narrower streets [and get away]. I was terrified that whole day. (Richard, Stockholm)

This excerpt exemplifies the ways in which male drivers may use their cars in particularly dangerous ways to defend their status and their entitlement to occupy road space (Shreer 2002; Harding et al. 1998). Parker et al. (2002, 234) found that the single behaviour most likely to provoke drivers to become ‘infuriated’ was related to another driver taking the parking spot he or she was waiting for. One could speculate that the cyclist, by verbally claiming his right to the cycling lane, comes to be seen as unrightfully taking a space drivers tend to consider ‘theirs’ in traffic-dense areas. Drawing on Lupton (1999), we can argue that in contemporary societies, the form of road rage exemplified above is deemed to be evidence of a loss of self-control, a condition that is not exactly tolerated

¹This law is per August 1, 2018 changed. The new law clarifies that even if there is a bike lane available, cyclists are allowed to use general traffic lanes with a speed limit up to 50 km/h. As was the case with the previous law, if suitable given the destination, cyclist are still allowed to use traffic lanes with higher speed limits. https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2018/06/cyklar-och-bilar-pa-samma-bana/
but is still considered understandable due to the automobility system as a site of frustration, impatience and stressful constraints.

In many respects, the violence that male and female cyclists talk about is not divided by gender, the exception being sexist abuse. Klara, a Stockholm cycling commuter, talked about a [present] ‘threat of violence’ to describe the Stockholm traffic, and when asked to elaborate about what such a threat may be about and from whom, she says she has only been ridiculed, suppressed and scolded by men:

They scream lots of things, they refer to my sex in a derogatory way, shouting ‘you goddamn cunt’ and ‘shut up’ and stuff like that. (Klara, Stockholm)

This example also relates to how female-dominated professions, such as the parking attendant or the traffic warden, may face similar sexist abuse from the very road users they are there to protect (Lundberg 2001). One interpretation is that sexism resonates back to how female cyclists have historically been denied mobility so as to keep women in subordinate positions and prevent them from speaking up (Hanson 2010). A woman may be called a ‘cycling cunt’, aimed at her specifically as a woman, while a man may, for example when on a racing bike and wearing lycra, be feminized by being called a ‘fag’. These are contradictory positions since they are simultaneously stigmatized and sexist, in many respects vulnerable, but the latter is also associated with masculine status such as risk-taking, competition and class-based resources in ways that sexist violations of female cycling bodies usually are not.

While the above example concerns experiences of verbal sexist violence, other contributors reflect upon the cyclist’s position in the traffic hierarchy in terms of feelings of marginalization and injustice:

The stakes are much higher as a cyclist – you may lose your life, while a motorist may get a dent in the bonnet, and a tap on the shoulder “it was only an accident, he wasn’t wearing any flashing clothes” and will not lose their licence or be imprisoned. (Happymtb.org)

Feelings of injustice are discussed primarily in the context of the police and that the law fails to take cyclists’ experiences of aggressive drivers seriously. This is in line with Nixon’s (2014) findings about how the transportation hierarchy, the law and the infrastructure, produce a sense of ‘unbelonging’ for active modes of transport. Other contributions elaborate upon this in ways that can be interpreted as a general lack of empathy from motorists:

… I have never got the question ‘How did it go?’; ‘Are you ok?’ or the like from motorists […]. (Cykelforum.se)

It’s completely unbelievable that he didn’t stop. He wouldn’t have known if I’d died or not, it’s totally impossible, it was just pure luck that time I made it […]. (David, Stockholm)

While the first of these excerpts exemplifies experiences of vulnerability and a general lack of care by motorists, the hit-and-run collision in David’s quote exemplifies in a much more extreme way how some car drivers may become what Nixon (2014) refers to as ‘alienated’ from other road users, including their ‘sense of responsibility to them’. Such careless road practices exemplify problems that I suggest should be seen as tightly interlinked with the ways in which the automobility regime and the dominance of the car constructs uncaring and violent configurations of men and masculinity, including performances of careless masculinity (Joelsson 2014; Hanlon 2012). How cyclists negotiate such experiences is a question that I will develop further in the following section.

Negotiating violent mobilities

When looking at how cyclists problematize, explain and negotiate their experiences and how this is gendered, a number of themes emerge that form a general context for understanding violent mobilities. Some of the themes that are discussed online concern municipalities’ unwillingness to fund proper bike-friendly infrastructures, while other themes problematize the Swedish car culture,
including a perceived lack of respect and marginalization of cyclists, as discussed above. This latter theme is associated with discourses of so-called ‘cycling hate’ and anti-cyclist discourses. Similar to cyclists in the UK (Christmas et al. 2010; in Aldred 2013), Swedish cyclists have been characterized as displaying a serious failure of attitude and poor road behaviour, such as disregard for the law or lack of knowledge about the rules of the road. Several informants talked about reckless male cyclists as problematic for commuters cycling at moderate speeds. For example, Lena talks about so-called ‘Tour de France’ cyclists:

As a cautious cyclist, you get squeezed in between aggressive drivers and hot-headed cyclists who think they are at the Tour de France. (Lena, Stockholm)

Lena here exemplifies what Aldred (2013, 256) discusses as a blurring of the boundaries between cycling as ‘sport’ and cycling as ‘everyday activity’, the problem being when cycling is turned into ‘exercise’ and competition. Competitiveness and ‘doing exercise’ in the wrong place at the wrong time makes up another example of how careless masculinity may be performed, only this time it is on a bike. The Tour de France racer seems to be produced in a space where the ability to cycle fast and take risks simply does not include caring for other road users (cf. Joelsson 2013, 189). Following this, here cycling offers a contradictory way for some men to adapt to more ecomodern and sustainable forms of masculinity. Rather than being part of the solution to achieving more sustainable mobilities, the Tour de France racer illustrates how ecomodern masculinities can also be framed as obstacles to achieving more sustainable mobilities. According to the discussions in online forums, cyclists who do not follow traffic rules risk not only reproducing anti-cyclist discourses but also making cyclists legitimate targets:

I represented all the annoying cyclists he had met previously and now enough was enough. Hence, the obvious act of violence he was prepared to commit. (Cykelforum.se)

Of course, there are a lot of nice road users who cooperate in ways that set good examples. They are all nice to me and I am nice to them. (To watch out, signs, traffic rules, distance, you know, attentive courtesy that makes things so much easier.) Then there are those others, those who hate and threaten by their own agenda. They don’t give a damn about my behaviour, they see red as soon as they see my vehicle, they lump me together with every single cyclist they have ever met and are prepared to punish me for whatever they have ever done. (Happymtb.org)

Even though many forum members agree that many road users respect cyclists in general, there will always be drivers who tar every cyclist with the same brush. Forum members also state that, as also noted above, even though unjustified threats and hatred in traffic are fairly common, the police do not take the harassment of cyclists seriously. To report harassment and close calls will very likely be futile. This resonates with how Aldred (2013) discusses transport-related ‘stigmas’ as producing a situation in which cyclists feel that it doesn’t matter how they behave, as in a ‘damned if you do and damned if you don’t’ situation. Freudendal-Pedersen (2015) notes that the implication for cyclists is uncertainty and a continuing lack of safe spaces for cycling, which tends to breed negative images about cycling and safety in ways that do not favour more sustainable mobilities.

Apart from constructing negative images of cyclists as explanations for why they are being subjected to violence and harassment, cyclists also explain the occurrence of violent mobilities as being about some men’s feelings of inferiority and related to their self-esteem (cf. Shreer 2002):

People brag about how they frighten or splatter cyclists. There is a great hatred towards cyclists... especially amongst overweight dumb self-righteous men. Most likely this is an effect of a feeling of inferiority coming from envy of our boldness and our beautiful bodies. (happymtb.org)

In this quote, the contributor makes sarcastic comments about ‘overweight’ and ‘dumb’ male drivers, as being particularly hateful towards cyclists. These men’s dangerous road practices are constructed as being due to envy about what the cyclists’ position entails, referred to as ‘boldness’ and ‘beautiful bodies’. In turn, this sarcasm flips the traffic hierarchy upside down. While control
over cars traditionally implies masculinity and power, compared to the motorist, the cyclist’s position tends to parallel femininity, in terms of weakness and being vulnerable. With the cyclist’s position being constructed as desirable, the hatred and violence are referred to as a way for some men to ward off their imagined feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis cyclists (cf. Hanlon 2012). Other informants emphasize men’s close relations with their cars for understanding violent mobilities:

[O]ften it’s men’s relations to their cars and that the car is an extension of themselves and that it’s such a great part of their identity that you can’t question […] it’s like a human right to drive any way you want. And then maybe cycling becomes a silent questioning of their driving, I think they experience. (Lena, Stockholm)

Lena makes the connection between men and their cars into an explanation for why conflicts occur; as having to do with male drivers’ sense of self and that cyclists may challenge their imagined right to the road (cf. Shreer 2002, 339). The idea about cars being extensions of their users concurs with Lupton’s argument that ‘there is a strong element of eroticism inherent in the power offered by the car and drivers’ belief that they can take charge over this power and manipulate it for their own ends’ (1999, 60). This would suggest that the merging of human bodies and car bodies empowers, in this case, men, to claim road space even in violent ways. This also applies to the negative images of the MAMIL (middle-aged man in lycra), who may be constructed as a particularly careless and ruthless urban male cyclist (Andersson 2015). Having said this, men’s violent road practices are also explained by specifically referring to stress, as in the following example where the careless driving practices of ‘craftsmen’ are explained by their stressful working situation:

Craftsmen seem mostly interested in arriving at their next workplace as soon as possible regardless of what other road users do: motorist, cyclist or pedestrian doesn’t matter, it should only go fast. (Happymtb.org)

However, drivers may also be discussed in terms of developing more caring driving practices with regards to cyclists, especially professional drivers, who may have colleagues who ride bikes:

My theory is that it has to do with messenger drivers often having colleagues who are bike messengers, and that’s why they see cyclists as humans rather than only irritating obstacles in traffic. (Happymtb.org)

This way of negotiating driver categories and their road practices is in line with Nixon’s (2014) point about the need for ‘intermodal empathy’, and that drivers need to learn about what it means to be a cyclist in order to respect cyclists. Nixon’s point is that more caring road practices can be produced if the embodied knowledge of being in that marginalized position has been experienced first-hand. However, what is at stake here is not for drivers to experience marginalized positions first-hand, according to this contributor, it is rather a proximity to people they know who are cyclists (in this case, colleagues on bikes) that may produce more caring road practices towards cyclists. In the next section, I will discuss more specifically what the material at hand says about cyclists’ coping strategies in the context of violent mobilities.

**Coping with violent mobilities**

As noted by Pooley (2013, 162), people are likely to be deterred from cycling if the roads are perceived as too risky, while those who do cycle may develop strategies to negotiate such risks. The coping strategies of both women and men tend to build on avoidance and adjustment to the present situation, including working out specific strategies for how to respond to violent situations. In the following excerpt, we return to Klara, who refers to a situation in which she responded to a male pedestrian who verbally abused her for ringing her bell as warning before passing him on the cycle lane:
[He] yelled at me that I was a cunt. I yelled back ‘I have a cunt and it’s wonderful!’ So you have to think of things (to say), you may do so when you’ve been through this a few times. But when it comes uncalled for, it is unpleasant. You have to have some strategies. (Klara, Stockholm)

By preparing herself with ironic comments, Klara uses humour to resist being defined by derogatory and misogynist discourses. Other ways of coping with their present cycling situation is through a combination of adjustment and emotional control. This latter strategy encompass preparing oneself by anticipating dangerous situations when cycling:

‘I am hated by everything and everyone. All others are idiots.’ Works well. Approximately once per 10 kilometres there is a motorist doing an insane thing, but then I don’t get upset. (Happymtb.org)

By assuming hatred and stupid behaviour from other road users, this cyclist claims to avoid emotional distress from cycling in car-dense areas, including better emotional control. The material at hand provides several examples of ways in which (male) informants negotiate whether, and if so how, to confront (male) drivers whom they feel have mistreated them. A less directly confrontational way of claiming one’s space as a cyclist is to act like Niclas, a commuter who uses his powerful bicycle lights to make himself appear like a motorcar on dark roads:

There is a clear change of behaviour when you are more on equal terms with the motorist. […] It’s never fun to dazzle someone, but it is a good lesson for some. (Niclas, Linköping)

Even though cyclists lack the weight, power and mass of a car, powerful lights may be used to require other road users to treat cyclists on equal terms with a car driver. Other examples are more directly confrontational, as in the following example when a (presumably male) cyclist stops a bus driver:

I stopped him by opening the engine hatch on his bus, so that the gear was put out, and I told him what he had done, with the request not to do it again. (Happymtb.org)

While this confrontation was based on the cyclist’s specialist knowledge of how buses work, confronting male drivers may also be associated with great risk. Magnus, a 45-year-old year-round cyclist, talks about the importance of emotional control in situations when experiencing threatening situations:

I usually wave back rather than giving the finger in return. Of course, you get scared stiff when you almost get hit. One has to make sure not to provoke any additional anger and try to calm things down a bit. (Magnus, Linköping)

Avoidance of being provoked by drivers was a strategy that several informants stressed. For example, one of the female informants leads group rides in her cycling club; for them, any form of pointing fingers or raising fists in response to drivers behaving aggressively would be against the club’s regulations and would potentially put other club members at risk of retaliation. In such cases, she says, ‘we continue cycling as if nothing had happened’.

In a previous study of Swedish online communities, I noted that cyclists may share stories about cyclists having been beaten up, chased or in other ways threatened and put at risk by male motorists (Balkmar 2014). Cyclists, presumably with a male majority, used online forums to discuss their experiences of what is broadly labelled ‘road rage’, and to negotiate ways to respond to aggressive drivers. These responses ranged from ironic humorous gestures, to outright confronting drivers by shouting, pointing fingers and banging on their cars. This online community also warned each other about intervening against male drivers, with the message ‘you never know who is behind the wheel and what he could be capable of’ (Balkmar 2014). The results of this study showed that, in contrast to dominant ideals of masculinity, which state that men should not back down when disrespected or harassed (Hearn 1998), just as for Magnus and the club members referred to above, backing down was a key strategy that (male) cyclists used when dealing with traffic harassment and the potential risk of escalating road conflicts. Several interviewees, including
many men, talked about how they used to become upset but over time have become more emotionally jaded. This also indicates that dominant ideals of masculinity may, in cases of modal conflict situations, be re-negotiated and potentially undermined.

**Conclusion**

Drawing on the empirical material, and the theoretical perspectives of Böhm et al., Joelsson, Nixon and others, in this concluding section I will reflect upon what can be learned about men and masculinities in the context of harassing and violent driving practices that cyclists experience, negotiate, and find strategies to cope with.

Firstly, violent encounters with drivers were, in general, understood in terms of explicit demonstrations of power, such as when (male) drivers performed close overtaking, aggressive honking, and hitting cyclists or abusing them in other ways. The cyclists negotiated the violence and aggression they faced in different ways: seeing it as having to do with drivers being stressed; about men’s close relations with their cars; about male drivers being frightened or feeling inferior; or as having to do with cyclists’ marginalized position in the traffic system more generally – including widespread anti-cyclist discourses. Hence, violent mobilities were discussed as a complex matter within which such practices were related to many different levels: psychological, discursive, and interpersonal, including cultural and more structural/systemic levels. Taken together, this generates certain inequalities and vulnerabilities for cyclists in car-dominated spaces (cf. Nixon 2014).

Secondly, from the perspective of the discussions above, automobility appears to be a ‘violent regime’ that produces uncaring, oppressive and violent configurations of men and masculinity (cf. Joelsson 2013). The automobility regime demands vulnerable road users’ consent to discipline themselves under the violent submission that cars require of them (Jain 2005). It is a regime that not only reproduces the dominance of motor vehicles over other means of mobility, but also makes it possible for some drivers to violently perform their ‘right to the road’, and by doing so violating cyclists’ bodily integrity. In this material violent performances involving motor vehicles, which can be called careless masculinity, are primarily related to male drivers (cf. Joelsson 2014). This would suggest that certain men and certain masculinities, play key roles in the reproduction of unsustainable mobilities. Following this, attempts of changing travel patterns from unsustainable cars to more sustainable mobilities have to include engaging critically with the many ways in which technologies of movement contribute to the production, reproduction and contestation of masculinities and men’s mobility practices, including cultural conceptions of what it means to be a modern man (cf. Kronsell, Smidfelt Rosqvist, and Winslott Hiselius 2015). However, even though automobility reproduces traditional scripts associated with men, masculinity and power in public space, violent mobilities cannot be understood within a binary gendered framework; there is neither clearly a typical victim position nor a gendered perpetrator position. In fact, while men have been described as having less positive attitudes towards traffic regulations and safety compared to women, over the last couple of years there has been an increase in women’s crashes and risk-taking behaviours (ETCS 2013). Against this background, it would be problematic not to consider that ‘masculine’ and uncaring road practices may also be performed by individuals characterised as women, or be performed by vulnerable male cyclists, for that matter.

Thirdly, the conflicts addressed here demonstrate the importance of understanding violent mobilities as a gendered problem in the transition towards more sustainable mobilities. Violence and aggression in traffic are conditions that are problematic for the creation of sustainable, cycling-friendly cities, because it makes cycling less attractive (Horton and Parkin 2012, 311; Nixon 2014, 91). Uncaring road practices tend to reproduce tacit masculine rules of the road, prioritizing faster and bigger modes of transport and reinstating the motor car as the norm in the traffic hierarchy, reproducing cycling as a marginalized means of mobility. Some research has shown that, for women in particular, feeling comfortable cycling was ‘the strongest positive
influence on women’s ‘bicycle use’ (Emond, Tang, and Handy 2009, 14). Other research has shown that dangerous traffic and fear of harassment influences travel patterns and that women in particular may refrain from cycling due to safety concerns (Garrard, Crawford, and Hakman 2006; Heesch, Sahlqvist, and Garrard 2011). However, in line with Bonham and Wilson (2012, 74, see also Heesch et al. 2011), this study shows that both men and women sometimes find cycling threatening and violent. In fact, none of the informants wanted to stop cycling because of their violent experiences. Instead, both men and women used strategies to cope with cycling as violent and risky; by avoidance, by not talking back, through emotional control, and adaptation to car drivers, including actively avoiding escalating conflicts with (male) drivers. As Uteng and Cresswell (2008) note, the way in which people relate to technologies of movement is not only a matter of the reproduction, but also the contestation, of dominant notions of gender and power. For example, this could be seen in the ways in which female informants actively claimed their space as cyclists in risky traffic environments, and thereby challenged traditional conceptions of femininity and risk-taking. In addition, dominant forms of masculinity can be challenged by more men taking to cycling. One way of interpreting the various forms of violence and aggression exemplified above is that men (which does not exclude women) identifying themselves with combustion masculinity, a form of masculinity based on threatening power (Redshaw 2008), are reacting violently as more eco-modern forms of masculinity (Hultman 2013), here associated with cycling, become more mainstream.

Finally, the material at hand seems to indicate both the permitting of ongoing abuse by (often male) drivers, as in cyclists becoming jaded and more or less accepting of the situation, to a position that is more a response that furthers cyclists’ rights. Even though some informants feel they have accepted conflict situations as ‘normal’ (cf. Aldred and Crosweller 2015), cyclists do not simply adapt to the existing culture and car-normative infrastructure. For example, cyclists’ marginalization in traffic space may in fact become a vital resource for the formation of a ‘resistant counter-culture’ (Cox 2015, 29). Judging by the material analysed in this study, cyclists’ experiences of harassment and violence form an incentive for critical reflections about vulnerability, primarily in relation to problematic drivers, masculinity, poor infrastructure, the media, the police and cyclists’ marginal position in car-dominated societies more generally. Online forums seem to offer important spaces for heightened political awareness, and for critical discussions about cyclists’ current situation in particular (Balkmar and Summerton 2017). These forums say something about the general attitudes and associated social (including gendered) connotations of cycling in ways that sharply contrast with the much more positive image of cycling given in cycling promotion campaigns, which strategically emphasize health benefits and environmental sustainability. In the wake of antagonism and the dominance of motor vehicles, the formulation of more cycle friendly mobility futures is urgently called for, including the performance of more eco-modern masculinities.

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