

Sociology

<http://soc.sagepub.com/>

Balance is Everything: Bicycle Messengers, Work and Leisure

Ben Fincham

Sociology 2008 42: 618

DOI: 10.1177/0038038508091619

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://soc.sagepub.com/content/42/4/618>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[British Sociological Association](http://www.britishsociologicalassociation.org.uk/)

Additional services and information for *Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://soc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://soc.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://soc.sagepub.com/content/42/4/618.refs.html>



Balance is Everything: Bicycle Messengers, Work and Leisure

■ **Ben Fincham**

University of Brighton

ABSTRACT

The conceptual separation of 'work' and 'life', as distinct elements of social activity, has become established as shorthand for the social and psychological dislocation felt by being at work and not being at work. There is a literature on the work/life balance driven by governmental rhetoric, based on the idea of flexible working. This article suggests that distinctions between 'work' and 'life', implying a dichotomy in adult life, are overstated. Using material from a study of bicycle messengers this article presents a rich account of a group of workers for whom the binary distinction between work and life is meaningless. The account of this world of work is more closely aligned with those of the jazz musicians described by Becker or the boxers of Weinberg and Arond, where the occupation, identity and culture are not confined to hours of work.

KEY WORDS

bicycle messengers / employment / ethnography / subculture / work/life balance

The conceptual separation of 'work' and 'leisure', or more bizarrely 'work' and 'life', as distinct elements of social activity has, over the last 20 years, become established as a shorthand for the social and psychological dislocation felt by being at work and not being at work (Bramham, 2006). There is a large literature on the work/life balance (Caproni, 2004; Kay, 2003; Perrons, 2003; Sturges and Guest, 2004; Warren, 2004), driven, in part, by governmental rhetoric (Directgov, 2007), and based on the idea of flexible working (Bramham, 2006: 385; Taylor, 2001). However, there is a growing body of work that asks whether this binary approach to everyday adult life is justified (Caproni, 2004: 213–16; Taylor, 2001). The place of friendships formed at

work (Pettinger, 2005), working identities and subcultures (Fincham, 2007) enjoyment (Fincham, 2007) and, perhaps most importantly, the observation that the work/not work binary has never been as strong as has been suggested (Nichols, 1986; Strangleman, 2007) are all important factors in providing a realistic appraisal of what 'work' means to people.

This article suggests that distinctions between being at work and not being at work, implying a dichotomy in adult life, are overstated and that the discourse of a work/life balance is unhelpful. Using material from a study of bicycle messengers in the UK this article presents a rich account of a group of workers for whom the binary distinction between work and life, work and leisure or work and not work are relatively meaningless. The account of this world of work is more closely aligned with those of the jazz musicians described by Howard Becker (1951) or the boxers of Weinberg and Arond (1952), where the occupation, identity and culture are not confined to hours of work, and it stands in contrast to those described in studies of call centre workers (CBI, 2000) or dissatisfied middle managers waiting each day for work to end and 'life' to begin (Grimshaw et al., 2002).

This article draws largely on the ethnographic phase of a study of bicycle messengers in the UK conducted between 2001 and 2004. The study also involved a quantitative questionnaire survey distributed across the UK, and 40 semi-structured interviews with messengers in two primary research locations. These interview locations, one large UK city and one medium-sized UK city, were also the sites for the ethnography.

In my study, there is a clear gender bias in the industry towards men – one in six of respondents to the survey ($n = 154$) were women. The survey suggested high levels of educational attainment in the population; over a third of the messengers surveyed are educated to degree level or above. The average age of messengers in the survey was 28, perhaps higher than anticipated, and this was corroborated by the range of jobs that messengers had been employed in prior to messengering – suggesting that people were not going into messengering from school or straight from university. Further, bicycle messengering was not considered by any interviewees as a job for life, the average working life being about three years. However, a messenger identity echoes far into ex-messengers' lives, with many still identifying with the attitudes towards the relationship between 'what you do for a living' and 'who you are' that messengering engenders.

The rationale for presenting a close, ethnographic reading of features of this particular employment sector is that detailed accounts illuminate complexity (Fincham, 2006a; Geertz, 1975) – this is important when critically evaluating the relevance or usefulness of catch-all phrases such as work/life balance. This article examines the importance of fashion and style in consolidating a sense of community and subcultural attachment. It then moves to describe, in some detail, the role of 'messenger events' as sites of overt subcultural expression indicating a sense of identity which is defined *through* work, rather than standing in contrast to work – as is implied in the rhetoric of work/life. The kinds of events and practices described in this article are indicative of a deep sense of identification with a job that underscores messengers' lives, rather than

being a distinct segment of it. By examining this particular workforce it is proposed that these processes of subcultural affiliation and identity construction (Hodkinson, 2002) through work (Fincham, 2007) are applicable outside of this particular employment sector.

Bicycle messengers began to appear on the streets of cities in the UK in the mid-1980s, the idea having been imported from the United States where messengers had been a feature of parcel and message transportation for many years. Although bicycles have been used as a tool for work throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries the current bicycle messenger industry is a relatively new phenomenon in the UK. As has been highlighted and will be further explored, out of this industry has emerged a strong occupational identity that is underscored by several features distinct to cycle messengering. One of these is the participation in bicycle courier races and competitions. These events are generally organized by and for messengers and often involve many peripheral activities related to cycling and, more specifically, messengering. There is a deliberate attempt at such events to replicate the conditions under which messengers operate – suggesting that the work and lives of these workers are interrelated in ways that contradict the idea of a divergence between ‘work’ and ‘life’.

Brief Explanation of the Job of Cycle Messengering

The work of a bicycle messenger is, on the face of it, relatively simple. The job involves picking up packages, parcels or letters from one place and delivering them to another. Bicycles are used as they are often the quickest way of navigating traffic-congested city centres. The way in which the locations of individual deliveries, or ‘drops’ as they are known, are communicated to the riders is via two-way radio, pager or, increasingly, mobile telephone. Most firms operating bicycle messengers have a central control location, normally an office, where a ‘controller’ takes orders over the telephone from businesses or individuals who need something delivered. The controller will then distribute the jobs to messengers on the road over the radio, pager or mobile phone. The larger the number of messengers working for a firm the more organized the controller needs to be. The location of each rider has to be known by the controller in order to distribute jobs sensibly. For example, if a rider is in the east of a city and a delivery comes in ‘picking up’ in the east and ‘dropping’ in the north, the controller needs to know that the rider will be able to ‘cover’ this job and then be able to receive a consecutive job ‘picking up’ in the north and taking it elsewhere. This process will be happening for several riders at the same time. The skill of the controller is to make sure that the whole city can be covered at all times and that all of the riders are busy at all times. Generally, this means that riders will be kept apart, as there is no point in having two riders covering the same area. For this reason messengering can be quite a lonely job as colleagues may meet up only a couple of times a day. After a while messengers become closely familiar with the city that they work in, creating a mental map of the quickest routes for cycling. Most

messengers are paid on a commission based, per-job basis. Because of this messengers make most money if they are carrying a number of packages at once and dropping them off en route to other pick-ups. This is known as a 'run'. The process of riding to and from city centre or suburban offices, picking up and dropping off packages is essentially the job of cycle couriers (Fincham, 2006a).

Strong Attachment to Working Identity

The concept of identity is central to understanding the complex relationship people have with being and not being at work. The idea of a separation between 'work' and 'life' can be properly assessed only when a worker's identification with their work, and the relationships that are formed within their working environments have been explored. It is certainly true that there is a qualitative literature that illustrates the deep affiliation people *have* had with their work – from East Anglian fishermen (Lummis, 1977) to American locomotive engineers (Gamst, 1980). Indeed, when talking of work in the past, Strangleman points to recent literature dealing with the 'end of work' systematically playing down the relevance of identification with work or the role of agency in a person's experience of work (2007: 97). However, there are plenty of examples of a deep sense of affiliation and identity in many accounts, and in particular recollections, expressed by people when asked about work (Strangleman, 2007: 97–8). It should be noted that, whilst I am arguing that it is increasingly unusual for workers to identify their work as a 'way of life' in contemporary settings, bicycle messengers are not unique – take for example farmers (Enticott, 2003; Price and Evans, 2006) or artists (Bain, 2005).

In the case of bicycle messengers, the identification with a particular way of being as a messenger was strong for many of the men and women that I came across in the course of the study. The job seemed to dominate what Goffman would describe as the 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1959), with ideas of community and culture formulated around the job being of particular significance, and requiring particular attention (Fincham, 2007). As an ex-messenger in Washington wrote, 'being a courier, one quickly realizes, is much more than earning a living – it's a way of life, an attitude' (Cybergego, 2001). Whilst it would be overstating the case to suggest that all messengers feel as deep an affiliation as that previously described, it was certainly true that many I came across did. As I have described elsewhere, there is a symbolic compensation for messengers, where the maintenance of a particular image makes tolerable the poor conditions and pay of the work (Fincham, 2006b: 217).

'Being a Courier' – Fashion and Style

Results from my study highlighted that, with extremely high levels of injury – two-thirds of messengers sustaining an injury at work requiring hospital treatment in

an average period of three years working as a messenger (Fincham, 2004: 110) – and the very low pay (pp. 62–3), symbolic compensation would have to be high. Indeed, many of the messengers that I spoke to used the conditions of work, and the style, as positive contributory factors to their celebrated ‘outsider’ status. One messenger, when asked why he took the job, said:

It looked cool. Yeah. And nutcases. They looked like a cross between Mad Max and a road warrior, something like that, you know. And still, you know, you’re out on the road you can still see them. You can see the freedom. You know like surfers or skateboarders. You know, you can see the freedom. (Cargo Chris interview transcript, 5 June 2003)

For another the image, combined with the idea that he could earn a living riding a bicycle, outweighed other considerations:

It is a kind of cool image. Earning money cycling is cool, no doubt about that. I love being outdoors and being paid to ride my bike is a good thing and it’s definitely a bonus that it’s kind of perceived as quite a good job ... erm my girlfriend likes it. (Slam interview transcript, 18 March 2003)

Whilst the role of image may seem superficial to deeper questions of identity, the overt display of inside status is important. Simmel recognized the role of fashion – or style – in creating a sense of coherence for any community, especially one which perceives itself to be outside of the social norm and performs ‘the double function of holding a social circle together and at the same time closing it off from others’ (Simmel, 1997: 189). The journalist Susan Corrigan, writing in *The Independent*, summed up the ‘courier style’ as it is popularly portrayed. She describes ‘an urban tribe with Apocalypse Culture touches – piercings, tattoos, wild hairstyles, wrapped up in chains, Elastane and foul-weather gear’ (2003: 18). Whilst there are undoubtedly affectations adopted purely for fashion reasons, I found that it tended to be dictated by the work. As Corrigan suggests, practical cycling gear is often worn with hard-wearing clothes that will get dirty; this is less a fashion statement than a consequence of spending all day outside in all weathers – but this does result in a distinctive style which is known as a ‘courier style’.

Community and Identity

Whilst the identification through fashion is an important part of an identity that extends far beyond the working day, there are other factors that contribute to messengers’ sense of themselves as part of something greater than a job. One messenger said that wherever he was in the world he would find people he could immediately identify with:

[there] was something of a community. That wherever I worked I jumped into a place and there was a unit that you felt was part of you. You were part of it. (Simon Eastcoast interview transcript, 19 March 2003)

This raises two issues for the idea of a work identity for which a work/life binary has little relevance. The first is that for messengers the glue that binds the community is the shared experience of working in a dangerous, marginal job. The role of fashion, previously discussed, indicates to others that a person is taking this commonality seriously. Rather than the fashion creating the culture, the work provides the arena for the possibility of the culture, and that, in turn, informs the fashion.

The second is the ‘imagined’, ‘global community’ that messengers appear to belong to. Although Benedict Anderson’s initial thesis used the concept of ‘imagined communities’ to explain nationalism (Anderson, 1991: 6–7), his rationale for describing ‘nationhood’ as ‘imagined’ applies equally for social groups that mobilize common understandings or sentiments, outside of nationalistic sensibilities, to acquire a coherent social identity. This is a point made by Craig Calhoun, and goes some way to helping us to understand how two geographically distinct groups of bicycle messengers appear to share sentiments – to a greater or lesser extent – and undoubtedly manage similar identities. Calhoun says that people now think of themselves as part of ‘large collectivities linked primarily by common identities’ (1991: 95). It is through these kindred identities that people who may never have met can feel a commonality. The territory occupied by some imagined communities is subculturally rather than geographically located. There are bicycle messengers in contact with each other in places as diverse as Sydney, Bogota, Kabul, Warsaw, Toronto, Kyoto, Seattle, Edinburgh and Mexico City. Through these connections there are exchanges not only of ideas, but also of people, able to travel the world with their bicycles secure in the knowledge that they will have an established network of friends and access to employment. With such an embedded sense of identity and community and identity that coheres around the job of cycle messenger, the dislocation between a working identity and non-working identity in no way relates to this group of workers’ experience of work and life.

Replication of Work Outside of Work – Messenger Events

An interesting phenomenon when considering the apparently divergent relationship between being at work and not being at work is the extent to which some groups of workers engage in activities in their ‘spare’ time that are directly attributable to the type of work that they do. For some messengers these activities extend to literally replicating their conditions of work in order to compete against each other in a variety of messengering events.

The basis for these events is the way in which competition naturally occurs in the working day. A consequence of commission-based pay is that messengers are competing for jobs. The quicker a person is the more jobs they will complete in a day and the more they will get paid. With a finite number of jobs in a city on any working day messengers are pitted against each other all of the time. Throughout the study there were instances of competitiveness in the

everyday lives of messengers. When the control office was in the centre of the medium-sized city in which I worked, the shifts ended with all of the messengers that had worked that day gathering to check their 'scores'. The scores were simply the amount of money people had earned in that particular day. Whoever had earned the most was proclaimed the winner. If people heard that another messenger was heading for the same part of town as them they would ask over the radio if the other messenger wanted to race, or check their route to ensure that if they were to arrive first that it was a legitimate victory.

The organization of the pay in messengering encourages riders to get from one place to another as quickly as possible and by any means necessary. This involves riding flat out, flouting road traffic laws and taking chances in traffic that other cyclists would be unwilling to take. These aspects of the work – competition, speed and danger – are celebrated in the various messenger races and championships that take place all over the world. These events are seen by some as being integral to reaffirming the community and identity within messengering, this is not to say, however, that all messengers are involved in these events. In the medium-sized city in which I conducted part of the ethnography, for example, there is not a tradition of racing, or travelling to other cities to race.

Types of Event

There are several types of event differentiated by scale and intent. These range from illicit city races known as alleycats, which will either be contested within a city's courier community or advertised more widely through flyers, word of mouth and increasingly the internet, to organized daytime or weekend cycle rides from a specific meeting point to a specified destination. There are much larger events such as the continental championships – the European Cycle Messenger Championships (ECMC), the North American Cycle Courier Championships (NACCC) and the Australian Cycle Messenger Championships (ACMC). In 2004 there were many exotic global invitation events: for example, the 'Gran Premio en Guatemala' in Guatemala and the 'Kyotoloco' event in Kyoto, Japan. There are also the Global Gutz races. These are alleycat races that are organized in cities around the globe, which start at exactly the same time – irrespective of time zone. Courses of equal length are measured out in each of the participating cities and the races occur simultaneously, with results being posted on the internet, comparisons being made between competitors' times and a global race winner being declared. These events are accompanied by peripheral events such as parties, gigs and even art exhibitions.

Ethnographies of Two Major Messenger Championships

In the course of the fieldwork for this study I attended the 2002 Cycle Messenger World Championships (CMWC) in Copenhagen and the 2003 European Cycle

Messenger Championships (ECMC) in London. My level of involvement in each varied greatly due to circumstance and time. The following is a description of my involvement in the ECMC in 2003. It is intended to vividly illustrate the involved relationship some messengers have with their job and show that the levels of sociality and subcultural affiliation are high, calling into question any notion of a work/life dichotomy.

The European Cycle Messenger Championships, London 2003

The European championships took place in the middle of my fieldwork. This meant I was able to observe the preparation and execution of the event, and even get involved. I decided that an ideal way of getting a close perspective on all aspects of the championships would be to volunteer to help out. I had met a couple of people in the early stages of the fieldwork who were involved in the London Bicycle Messenger Association (LBMA), the organization that was coordinating the event, and they gave me telephone numbers of people who might benefit from my services. All of the organizers were giving their time for free; because of the flexible nature of messengering this tended to mean that people cut down their shifts and dedicated time to the championships. It is testament to the regard in which these events are held that several people that I ended up interviewing were saying that they would have to work flat out for months after to pay for the debts they had accrued through loss of wages due to volunteering for the championships.

It was as a result of volunteering that I found myself dropping 700 maps across south London by bike and 'bob box' (a four-foot trailer attached to the back of the bicycle), curating an exhibition of messenger memorabilia and art at an anarchist squat in Leytonstone, attending a couple of parties organized to accompany the championships and, as I describe, going to a roller race.

The Roller Race

The roller race was being held above a pub in Clerkenwell. I turned up, having delivered the maps, with a bike and a bob box not knowing what to expect. The pub was in a secluded street behind Clerkenwell Road. By the time I had arrived there was already a fair amount of people gathered for the race. Every available piece of fencing or railing had a bicycle attached to it. In places they were three or four deep. The competition was organized on a knockout basis. The opening round was based on individual 'distance' travelled in one minute. The quickest times went through to a race phase of competition where the riders competed in a straight two-person race, the winners going through to face each other until there were just two remaining. The roller bikes were mounted on a small, raised stage at one end of a large function room above the pub. As the riders were being whittled down the audience got more and more interested. By the end of the first round of timed rides there was a large crowd, tightly packed around the stage yelling encouragement to the competitors. Immediately after the event I wrote in my field diary:

This is a spectacularly odd event. I went into the pub and then upstairs into a smoke filled room. I saw a few faces that I knew and then was called over by Louise and Lynx. The roller race itself is set up on a stage where two bikes without front wheels were set up with wires coming out of the rollers. These were connected to a huge 'Metropolis' like clock dial with a red hand and a blue hand. These each indicated the relative speed and distance the riders would have travelled if they hadn't been still. For between twenty and thirty seconds the riders were eyes out, vein bulging, teeth gritting spinning. (Field diary, 21 May 2003)

In much the same way as the World championships in Copenhagen, I got a real sense of the tension between the desire to compete – and the competition at the roller race was intense – the desire to be seen as doing some sort of 'sport' and the maintenance of an image which is closely identified with behaviours seen as being bad for your health, most notably drinking, smoking and doing drugs. The room in which this incredibly strenuous activity was taking place was thick with cigarette and spliff smoke, and, although the drinking was moderate to begin with, it carried on long into the night.

One of the striking things about socializing with many bicycle messengers is the extent to which the dress is orientated towards cycling almost all of the time. That is to say that even when they were not working I would see people wearing three-quarter length trousers, SPDs (adapted shoes that have cleats on the soles that attach a rider to the pedals of their bicycle) and cycle/messenger wear T-shirts. For most messengers, the bicycle is their principal mode of transport, and so it might not be surprising that cycle wear is prevalent. However, it is interesting that there is an incorporation of what is ostensibly sports wear into the fashion codes of an anti-establishment messenger identity. The transformation of sports wear into messenger wear is dependent on the purpose of the clothing – there are often occasions when the practical usefulness of a piece of clothing or equipment is subservient to the social significance of its display. The clothing is used as a signifier of subcultural affiliation as much as it is practical everyday wear. The same goes for messengers' use of sport and competition. The roller race was an example of the subversion of the normative rules of what constitutes physically demanding, serious sport. It would be difficult to describe the drugs and alcohol being consumed at this particular event as performance enhancing, but the competition and admiration of exceptional sporting performance was as intense as at any other 'serious' sporting event.

After a couple of the second round races, I left the pub with a couple of the competitors. Ali had been the highest placed male Briton at the CMWC in Copenhagen, and S'later was a former European champion and is still a particularly highly regarded messenger world wide. They were both favourites to win the roller races and were through to the following rounds as we left. They were debating whether we should go to a restaurant and have a meal, or get a take away. It was at this point that the subversive nature of the roller race struck me. I had just been in a room above a pub, heavy with sweet smoke, filled with messengers from all over Europe totally immersed in a 'sport' for

which they have made up the rules and declaring champions that are happy to be celebrated within their community alone. In this situation sporting prowess and the excesses of drug and alcohol counter-culture sit side by side as un-contradictory positive attributes and here I was stood with a pair of people dressed in all of the sports/messenger hybrid gear talking about going for a sit-down meal in a restaurant.

The European Cycle Messenger Championships – Main Event

As I have mentioned, by the time the actual championships had started I had already been involved in a couple of events, as well as helping out with distributing flyers in central London, and distributing route maps to the championships. By 22 May the time had come to set up the racetrack. It was to be located at Lea Valley Park Cycle Circuit, a purpose-built on-and-off road surface about six or seven miles east of central London. I helped on the site construction. Two days before the championships started I rode with two London messengers, Smoke and Roller, through Hackney and on to Stratford. The race site itself was in the least promising of locations, tucked in between the huge A12 road and the Stratford New Town rail intersection. However, Lea Valley Cycle Circuit turns out to be a very large space. By the time the three of us arrived there were already about 10 people on site. It is traditional for the sites of championships to attempt to create a kind of village atmosphere and adopt a name for the duration of the competition: in Copenhagen it was Copetown; in London it was Babylondinium. There was to be camping on site, a bar, themed race checkpoints and numerous other things to be knocked up out of chipboard and painted. Because there were really only 15 people working on the site on this particular day it was an extremely useful way of getting to know a few more messengers. Despite there being designated organizers things were organizing themselves in an ad hoc way and there was an expectation that each person would take responsibility for anything that they saw as needing doing. There was a sense that the championships would work only if everybody pitched in and this expectation accentuated the feelings of community and solidarity between participating messengers. I did not go to the site the following day, but turned up at 'Messenger Mansion' (a large house occupied by messengers) just off the Grays Inn Road early on the opening day of the championships:

Saturday 24 May: The first day of the championships. I turned up at [the house] to find that everybody had gone over the top at an all night party at the gallery/squat. I had gone around to see if anybody wanted to ride up to Lea Valley. There were three French people who weren't sure of the way so I said as I'd been up there before I could lead them. Of course I missed the turning for Shoreditch High Street and got us hopelessly lost. By the time we got to the championship site it was getting on for 9.30 – the first race was to start at 10. As a volunteer you had to take a fair amount of responsibility for seeing what needed to be done and doing it. There was an amount of delegation of tasks, however.

I was put with five others in charge of timing the start and finish with no discernible organizer or expert in the high tech timing equipment that we had been asked to use. All of us were particularly nervous – if we fucked up the event would be ruined and we would be lynched. As it goes the equipment worked perfectly well and there were no hitches other than the normal four-hour delay before the start of the first race.

The event itself was a really great spectacle, hundreds of bikes and riders with the campsite and the track looking the business. In the pre-event blurb Wyatt had written a piece called ‘herding cats’ describing what it is like trying to organize bike messengers, I got the feeling that people didn’t really expect the thing to work, but in its own chaotic way it did. The atmosphere was similar to Copenhagen, maybe a little less European – a bit of a harder edge – but still very comradely. At events like this it is easy to see why people [messengers] talk about ‘culture’, there is a real sense of coherence and understanding between couriers from different places.

I was going back to [home] the next morning and it was with great regret that I left the European Bike Messenger Championships 2003, with my crew member T-shirt proudly on display and potted back to north-west London. (Field diary, 24 May 2003)

This type of event is replicated in places all over the world – varying in size and scope, but playing a similar subcultural role in the lives of those taking part. The point to be made here is that there is a conflation of all sorts of social activity that overlap in ways that cannot be accommodated in a binary approach to adult social life. Messenger events are replications, or accentuations, of aspects of daily working life; they are organized as sport – but are actually a hyper-reflection of the sort of competition that occurs during the working day between messengers. Participation in sport (for non-professional sportspeople) is associated with leisure, and inhabits the realm of ‘life’ in a work/life balance model. Importantly these events are social and populated by people that work together. The relationships that are formed at work extend far beyond the working day. Rather than a view of alienated, exploited individuals the ethnography of bicycle messengers has revealed a myriad of overlapping aspects of life that are interconnected in ways that make the conditions of work secondary to the symbolic social compensation offered by affiliation to, and participation in, this working identity.

It is interesting to note that the association with competition and leisure – through sport – is strong, but that competitiveness at work is generally associated with career progression, rather than day-to-day rivalry between colleagues. The amalgamation of work and competition that is inherent in messengering has, in the past, been a consequence of piecework or commission-based pay organization. Donald Roy’s work in factories in the 1940s and 1950s beautifully illustrates the interesting social relations that emerge as a result of piecework (Roy, 1952, 1953). Where Roy’s workers deliberately subverted the incentive to compete against each other for higher wages, the bicycle messengers in my study make sport out of it.

Messaging as Sport – Escaping or Strengthening the Work Nexus?

According to Norbert Elias, there are two primary uses of the term ‘sport’. One refers to ‘non-work related forms of activity, with or without an element of competition’ (Dunning et al., 2004: 8), a ‘socio-cultural universal’ according to Dunning et al. The other refers to ‘a group of competitive physical activities which are specifically modern in key respects and which first began to emerge in [the British Isles] in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ (Dunning et al., 2004: 9). It is this second definition that is more commonly invoked when people talk about ‘sport’. However, the sort of ‘sport’ practised at messenger events is a combination of extremes of the two operating within a highly specific subcultural paradigm.

The ‘civilizing’ process described by Elias with regard to leisure and sport is typified by the rationalization of activities into ‘sports’. The establishment and subsequent refinement of rules, the introduction of arbiters of interpretation of rules and the inculcation of participants into such ethos as ‘fair play’ or ‘sportsmanship’ alters the nature of an activity profoundly. For Elias, this ‘civilizing’ process introduced not just policing of others – by referees or judges – but also policing of self through ‘sporting’ behaviour. The result was ‘the possibility of obtaining a high level of pleasurable combat or contest tension and what was regarded as reasonable protection against the chances of injury’ (Dunning et al., 2004: 9). Interestingly for the study of messengers, Dunning and Elias’s work on the folk games of medieval and early modern Europe appears, on the surface, to broadly reflect the sort of ethic displayed at local messenger events:

... such games were not highly regulated and were played according to localized, orally transmitted customs rather than centrally determined written rules. They were also played over open countryside as well as through the streets of towns. Further to this the number of participants were indeterminate ... And finally these games involved a higher level of open violence than would be tolerated in comparable games today. (Dunning et al., 2004: 11)

An interview in the *Scottish Daily Record* with a messenger involved with alleycat racing presented messenger racing in terms consistent with the view that it is the modern equivalent of ‘folk games’ described by Dunning and Elias:

‘Alleycats are ill-advised and illegal, and can become drunken, disorderly riots through live city traffic,’ says Donnie. ‘Nobody takes responsibility for them and if people get hurt, too bad.’ (Mckean, 1999: 13)

At the heart of messenger events is the idea of ‘grassroots’ involvement and orientation towards working practices. The community organizes and competes in these loosely regulated events which are open to anybody foolhardy enough to be involved. There is a sense of the ‘anarchic’ in Dunning and Elias’ description of folk games and messenger events evoke this too. The idea of messaging as sport – as well as a job – meaning something as formal and regulated as mainstream sports is an anathema to those participating in events. However, there is an undoubted process of ‘civilizing’ underway.

The subcultural role of events is profound, and in order for the ‘imagined’ community to be sustained globally there must be social and cultural reference points common to all. Any messenger who has been to an alleycat, or a championship, will be able to participate in alleycats or championships anywhere in the world. The immediacy of events in cementing bonds between messengers is made possible through the recognizable symbols communicated through the event itself. A major part of this is the formalization and subsequent regulation of competition. Once a person understands the ‘rules’ of events they can fully participate, and one can include within the rules those facets of courier culture commonly practised at events aside from the racing – related to cycling and lifestyle.

Conclusions

As has been noted elsewhere, there has been a dearth of ethnographies of work and employment in recent years (Fincham, 2006a: 202). This is to the detriment of understanding what work means to people, and is also an impediment to informed contradiction of blanket assumptions about work in the 21st century – such as the discourse of work/life balance. The interconnectedness of identity, culture and relationships means that social life is far too complex to be captured in such bland, overarching descriptions. The use of ethnography as a technique for capturing these complexities is well known, and the connection between my own study and, in particular, Becker’s study of jazz players is obvious. The resonance of Becker’s work in my study is great. His description of what he found with the jazz players of 1950s’ Chicago could be equally applied to bicycle messengers of the 21st century. When he says ‘their activities are formally within the law, their culture and way of life are sufficiently bizarre and unconventional for them to be labelled as outsiders’ (Becker, 1963: 79), he might as well have been talking about messengers.

The discourse of work/life encourages a view of work as normally problematic to a fulfilling life ‘experience’. Whilst I readily acknowledge that many people’s jobs are hard, often demoralizing or unenjoyable, I would say that people’s experience of being a worker, the relationships they form at work or how they orient themselves around particular working identities are not confined to specific temporal or geographic locations – they spill out into all areas of life. In order to avoid constructing unhelpful and untruthful discourses, these complex relationships to work are, as Roy and Becker illustrated as early as the 1940s and 1950s, often best observed qualitatively.

As has been previously noted, cycle messengers are an unusual although not unique workforce, in that many equate their work as defining a way of life. However, the question of whether this subculture is a sustainable basis for individuals to resist more mainstream working lifestyles, for example in terms of ageing, is one that is still being played out. With the industry relatively new, the long-term effect of affiliating with this subcultural identity is not clear. A major

factor in the possible career trajectories of ex-messengers is the high level of educational attainment in the population: over a third of the messengers surveyed are educated to degree level or above. Combined with an average age of 28, it is the case that many messengers already have an unconventional work biography prior to becoming bicycle messengers (Fincham, 2004: 72). For some at least, messengering is a job that continues an already non-conventional 'career' path, but one underpinned by success in education – often equated with choice in terms of 'future' employment (Brown and Lauder, 2001: 68–9).

This article has concentrated on a clearly identifiable, 'outsider' workforce to illustrate a point about the discourse of work/life. It has discussed the relationship between subculture and identity. Much of the literature concerning subculture emphasizes the performance of specialist activities as means of asserting identity. The transformation of these specialist activities into competition and, subsequently, 'sport' or 'leisure' offers bicycle messengers geographic and temporal sites for subcultural expression – however, the point is that all of this activity revolves around a *working* identity. The importance messengers place on their working identities is almost ritualized in the various races and championships that take place all over the world. The events that messengers organize and participate in are intrinsically linked to their employment.

It is also obvious that a sense of community is important to messengers and this operates for many at two levels – first, the community of immediate colleagues working at the same time in the same city, and, second, the 'imagined community' of messengers worldwide. Delanty points out that any form of community is symbolically constituted and is 'articulated in the construction of boundaries' (2003: 189). The role of subcultural affiliation through practice and appearance is integral to understanding why messengers appear to have an acute sense of themselves as part of a community – rather than people who happen to do the same job.

It is worth noting that, just as my concern with the dislocation implied by a work/life discourse, the same concern has been highlighted by those studying leisure. As Raisborough suggests, work on women and 'serious leisure careers' 'engages critical attention to the dynamics within leisure, seemingly dislocating leisure from the wider aspects of participants' lives' (2006: 242).

The sorts of events described in this article are understandable as a reflection of the everyday lived experiences of messengers. They are a reflection of the physical and competitive nature of the work and an affirmation of subculture that can be both fulfilling and enjoyable – and not confined to the world of work. The organization and running of events, and the relationship they have with competition and sport illustrate the strong identification messengers have with a *working* identity which is also a *subcultural* identity. It is this alliance of culture, employment and competition that makes bicycle messengers and their events of particular interest and is a stark reminder of the dangers of making blanket assumptions about people's lived experience of work – such as encouraging people to look for the perfect work/life balance.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous referees for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. I am also indebted to friends and colleagues at the Cardiff School of Social Sciences and the University of Brighton School of Applied Social Science, in particular Professor Theo Nichols. I am also grateful to the ESRC for originally funding the project (award no. R42200134184).

References

- Anderson, B. (1991) *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- Bain, A. (2005) 'Constructing an Artistic Identity', *Work, Employment and Society* 19(1): 25–46.
- Becker, H. (1951) 'The Professional Dance Musician and his Audience', *American Journal of Sociology* 57(2): 136–44.
- Becker, H. (1963) *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Free Press.
- Bramham, P. (2006) 'Hard and Disappearing Work: Making Sense of the Leisure Project', *Leisure Studies* 25(4): 379–90.
- Brown, P. and H. Lauder (2001) *Capitalism and Social Progress: The Future of Society in a Global Economy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Calhoun, C. (1991) 'Indirect Relationships and Imagined Communities: Large Scale Social Integration and the Transformation of Everyday Life', in P. Bourdieu and J.S. Coleman (eds) *Social Theory for a Changing Society*, pp. 95–121. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Caproni, P. (2004) 'Work/life Balance: You Can't Get There From Here', *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science* 40(2): 208–18.
- CBI (2000) *Call Centres: A Business Guide*. London: Caspian.
- Corrigan, S. (2003) 'Bikes. Camera. Action', *The Independent* 14 June, Magazine, 18–21.
- Cybergeog (2001) 'Washington DC Bicycle Courier', URL (consulted October 2001): <http://cybergeog.com/courierhome.html>
- Delanty, G. (2003) *Community*. New York: Routledge.
- Directgov (UK Government Central Office for Information) (2007) 'Flexible Working and Work/Life Balance: An Introduction', URL (consulted March 2007): http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/employment/employees/workinghoursand-timeoff/dg_10029491
- Dunning, E., D. Malcolm and I. Waddington (2004) 'Introduction: History, Sociology and the Sociology of Sport: The Work of Norbert Elias', in E. Dunning, D. Malcolm and I. Waddington (eds) *Sports Histories: Figurational Studies of the Development of Modern Sports*, pp. 1–14. London: Routledge.
- Enticott, G. (2003) 'Lay Immunology, Local Foods and Rural Identity: Defending Unpasteurised Milk in England', *Sociologia Ruralis* 43(3): 257–70.
- Fincham (2004) 'Bicycle Couriers – Identity, Risk and Work', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff.
- Fincham, B. (2006a) 'Back to the "Old School": Bicycle Messengers, Employment and Ethnography', *Qualitative Research* 6(2): 187–205.

- Fincham, B. (2006b) 'Bicycle Messengers and the Road to Freedom', in S. Bohm, C. Jones, C. Land and M. Paterson (2006) *Against Automobility*, pp. 208–22. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Fincham, B. (2007) "'Generally Speaking People Are in it for the Cycling and the Beer": Bicycle Couriers, Subculture and Enjoyment', *Sociological Review* 55(2): 190–202.
- Gamst, F. (1980) *The Hoghead: An Industrial Ethnology of the Locomotive Engineer*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston.
- Geertz, C. (1975) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Hutchinson.
- Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Grimshaw, D., H. Beynon, J. Rubery and K. Ward (2002) 'The Restructuring of Career Paths in Large Service Sector Organizations: "Delaying", Upskilling and Polarisation', *Sociological Review* 50(1): 89–116.
- Hodkinson, P. (2002) *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Kay, T. (2003) 'The Work-Life Balance in Social Practice', *Social Policy and Society* 2: 231–9.
- Lummis, T. (1977) 'The Occupational Community of East Anglian Fishermen: An Historical Dimension through Oral Evidence', *British Journal of Sociology* 28(1): 51–74.
- Mckean, K. (1999) 'Meet the Bicycle Chain Gang', *Scottish Daily Record* 16 May, p. 13.
- Nichols, T. (1986) *The British Worker in Question: A New Look at Workers and Productivity in Manufacturing*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Perrons, D. (2003) 'The New Economy and the Work-Life Balance: Conceptual Explorations and Case Study of New Media', *Gender, Work and Organisation* 10(1): 65–93.
- Pettinger, L. (2005) 'Friends, Relations and Colleagues: The Blurred Boundaries of the Workplace', *Sociological Review* 53(2): 37–55.
- Price, L. and N. Evans (2006) 'From "As Good as Gold", to "Gold Diggers": Farming Women and the Survival of the British Farming Family', *Sociologica Ruralis* 46(4): 280–96.
- Raisborough, J. (2006) 'Getting Onboard: Women, Access and Serious Leisure', *Sociological Review* 54(2): 242–62.
- Roy, D. (1952) 'Quota Restriction and Goldbricking in a Machine Shop', *American Journal of Sociology* 57(5): 427–42.
- Roy, D. (1953) 'Work Satisfaction and Social Reward in Quota Achievement: An Analysis of Piecework Incentive', *American Sociological Review* 18(5): 507–14.
- Simmel, G. (1997) 'Fashion, Adornment and Style', in D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds) *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, pp. 182–218. London: SAGE.
- Strangleman, T. (2007) 'The Nostalgia for Permanence at Work? The End of Work and its Commentators', *Sociological Review* 55(1): 81–103.
- Sturges, J. and D. Guest (2004) 'Working to Live or Living to Work? Work/Life Balance in the Early Career', *Human Resource Management Journal* 14(4): 5–20.
- Taylor, R. (2001) *The Future of Work-Life Balance*. Swindon: ESRC.
- Warren, T. (2004) 'Working Part-Time: Achieving a Successful "Work-Life" Balance?', *British Journal of Sociology* 55(1): 91–121.

Weinburg, S.K. and H. Arond (1952) 'The Occupational Culture of the Boxer', *American Journal of Sociology* 57(5): 460–9.

Ben Fincham

Is a lecturer in the School of Social Science at the University of Brighton. He was previously an ESRC postdoctoral fellow at Cardiff University and a research associate at the National Centre for Research Methods, also at Cardiff. He is a founder member of the Cycling and Society Research Group and continues to research and write about sustainable mobilities, in particular cycling.

Address: School of Applied Social Science, University of Brighton, Mayfield House, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9PH.

E-mail: b.m.fincham@brighton.ac.uk