

Safety Check



From the Safety Chick

The Theory of Big

A few months back Scott Schadel sent me the attached article to be used sometime in the future. At first glance it may seem a bit long, but I think you will enjoy the perspective. See you on the road!

The Theory of
BIG
or, How to claim your space on the
road

by David Martin

From our earliest days we have been indoctrinated by this nation's pathological love affair with the motor car. As a hangover of the class system of antiquity, we, the unfortunate possessors of a healthy mind and body, are bombarded daily with the mistaken view that roads are for cars. Driven, sometimes literally, off the roads by our fellow citizens in steel boxes, we begin to realise that never before in history have so many been subject to so much machinery. And it's not just using the cars that is a problem. Without the resources to house their cherished possessions properly, our social betters see fit to leave the stabling of their salary sucker to be a stumbling block for the rest of us, whether it be on the pavement or on the queens highway.

So from where does the problem come? Deep within the subconscious of every British citizen is the tacit acceptance of the priority of the motor vehicle on the roads, fortunately with no basis in law. 'Roads were made for cars' is a common refrain that exemplifies the convoluted thinking potentially induced by carbon monoxide and benzene. There is the self belief that any person who dares to shrug off their synthetic carapace and emerge naked to their environment on the road is some bicycling Baldrick or a forelock tugging yer 'umble servant. Such types as are fit only to be driven off the road at the whim of Mr Toad as he goes past on his more important journey. 'Poop poop!' and a cloud of exhaust are all that remain as he thunders off into the distance whilst you pull yourself out of the hedge. Never mind that roads were created for people to use for transport (not for people to use as car parks).

How does one claim one's space on the road without the support of a herd of highland cattle? This is where the theory of BIG comes in. Life on the roads is a power struggle. Not of physical ability, but of psychology with roots in the antiquity of animal behaviour. The late twentieth century Homo sapiens (the nomenclature committee

is revising the species classification) , unlike the rest of the animal kingdom, has been stripped of much of its evolutionary heritage. There are no natural displays of preening or prowess that are socially acceptable (at least in Britain thank you very much) so we have subverted transport to be our preening display of BIG. If we have a display that is more BIG than the other guy then we win. Bigger , faster, more expensive and he backs off. We get the girl (at least that is what the advertisement said). It isn't quite true that we have lost all natural displays. One can show a generally fit, healthy body in best evolutionary manner, but not when sat inside a car.

Beer drinking, pay

packet, driving prowess, prettiness of girlfriend. All these are lads new evolutionary power struggles. And the most insidious of these is transport. Ever heard a group of reps talking? 'I was doing 100 in the outside lane when a repmobile GT pulls up behind me and wants to overtake. No way, cos I've got a repmobile GTX and there's no way I'd let a mere GT go past me'. Loss of BIG you see. All psychological. Willing to be a stupid git to out psyche someone he's never met and probably will never see again. All to boost his self BIG. But how does this work out when you are on a bike and I am in a car. Surely you lose by default?

Not at all. BIG in

transport terms is partly about what you drive and partly about how good a driver you are. And the drivers have already lost to the cyclists. Every time you pass a car in a traffic jam the driver's BIG shrinks. You have just told him by your presence that despite all his prowess at driving and super smart and expensive car, you are still getting from A to B faster than him. Ouch, that hurts. And appearance counts too. A scratch on your shiny new year's model Fraud Mundano GLTXi turbo is like turning up to a formal dinner in shorts and baggy-T. Unthinkable. It says 'even though I have a great car I am a crap driver'. And cyclists do a lot of damage when you hit them. They have lots of sharp sticky out bits that can remove wing mirrors or scratch body work. Definitely to be avoided. He will remember this. So remind him. Say 'I've got more BIG than you' as you take your rightful place on the road and let him be subservient to you. You get the girl. He gets a heart attack. After all, you can wear lycra and get away with it and he has to suffer with a shirt on a coat hanger.

A belief in his driving

prowess is what leads the macho rep to only leave 6 inches from wing mirror to cyclist as he brushes past, that is assuming he actually saw you whilst yakking away on his mobile. So good he can hold a line that close, preferably the faster the better. Obviously, he has to allow you the space that you use on the road, as hitting you means he loses face. And how much space you leave for something on the road depends on how BIG it is.

BIG isn't about how

large you are but about how large you seem. The rules of BIG are very simple. Be visible. Be noticed. Be in the way. Be expensive. The more BIG you have, the more space needs to be left. Ever seen a car brush past a moving, wobbly, deferential Baldrick-on- a-bike with a scant hands breadth to spare, only to leave room for a double-decker bus to pass between it and the most definitely

not wobbling all over the road skip further down the road? BIGger things need a BIGger distance left when you pass them.

The rules of
BIG

Be visible

If they don't see

you they won't remember to bow down and worship the ground you pedal over. So be seen. BIG things to wear are solid bright colours. Preferably big and baggy so they flap a bit. Gives a bit more uncertainty where the edge is. Broken patterns and suchlike are not BIG. They merge with the transport background and break up your outline to a lot of SMALL rather than one BIG.

Wide tyres, wide panniers,

anything to make the bike BIG. And don't forget to signal. Makes drivers take a bit more notice. BIG signals with BIG eye contact. 'I am turning right, just see if I don't'.

Be noticed

Just another

bicyclist? Not me mate. I'm different. You'll notice me. A trailer on the back. It has its own BIG from its size, but it hits what passes for the drivers brain more because they are not used to it. Different is BIG. A recumbent or a tandem is BIG. Heck, even riding along with a silly hat on or a dinosaur with wings is pretty BIG. A child seat and 'Baby on Board' sticker is also good.

Another trick is to wobble

slightly. If you look unsafe on a bike (it takes a lot of practice to get a really good wobble going safely) then they will notice you more, increasing your BIG. And movement across the field of vision is BIGger than movement towards or away. Hands free mobile phones could count as really BIG in this case, not one of those funky ear piece thingies, but hands off the bars and having a good natter to your mates makes it look like you are about to swerve across three lanes of traffic without warning. Definitely to be avoided.

Be in the way

OK, how much

room do you need to ride a bike on the road? The least I have ever used was about four inches from kerb to wheel whilst being brush-passed by a juggernaught at 40+mph. Big laundry bill that day. But how much do you really need to be a law abiding cyclist? Try this. Ride along at your normal distance from the edge of the road. Now open up your Highway code and do a proper left turn signal. That's right, arm straight out. If you are really BIG then the pedestrian waiting to cross at the lights won't have been slapped around the face by accident, or wrapped your elbow around the belisha beacon. There you go. A minimum is so you can perform legal signals and still be totally on the road.

OK, so you are now a bit

further out, maybe further than you are used to. And now you discover something else. BIG things stick out further into the road than little things. And BIG

things need more room. And strangely enough, the more room you take up, the more space cars leave for you! Broadly speaking, cars will leave you as much room as you leave yourself so keep out from the edge of the road about the same distance you want cars to keep out from you.

This is only a guideline.

Sometimes you will have left just enough room for the driver to sneak through without having to alter course and you still get brush-passed. Not what you want. So move out a bit more. Enough so he has to consciously move around you. If you have to be steered around then you are really BIG and need to be left more space. About level with the front nearside wing, just inside the wheel track that has been nicely swept clean of broken indicator and windscreen glass and other motor effluent that the master race deem the peasant classes barely worthy of riding over.

Now put the boot on the other foot. Imagine you are the victim of a cruel conspiracy and are forced to transport yourself inside a glass and metal cage everywhere. You come to a road junction where you have to give way. Where are you looking? At the cars of course. So, thankfully reverting to uncaged mode, where do you want to be to be seen? Where people are looking!. Yup, and they are looking at the line of cars so you want to be tucked right up against the pavement ... not! Get into the line of sight and you will be seen. Stay out of it and you won't be. No matter how many lights, reflectors, or fluorescent pink cycle jerseys you use. People see BIG things. BIG things are what people see. BIG is in the line of sight.

Now of course one doesn't need to get in the way if the road is plenty wide enough to share, but only when it is uncomfortably narrow for Mr Toad to steer his fume conditioned three-piece- suite-in- a-tin alongside you without giving you the space you need.

Cowering in the dirt and potholes of the gutter, your body language screaming 'I am not worthy, O great infernally combustioned one. Chastise me for presuming to use this road and taking a mere second of your time for that urgent trip down the corner shop for a packet of fags and the Sunday paper. It is my just reward if I am left bleeding and injured amongst the remains of my bicycle as you continue your blissful journey onwards.' is not a particularly BIG attitude, but it is what our autocracy would have you believe is appropriate. Let me tell you a secret. They are not telling the truth.

Be expensive

Running over a

child is still frowned upon in this society. Having to admit you ran a child on a bike off the road is a bad thing for your BIG. What an excuse for having children? No, but a child seat is a useful accessory for carrying the shopping and if you have a nice high-backed one the cars can't see there is no child in it until they are past.

On the other hand, wearing a police uniform (when

allowed, to of course) is about as BIG as you can get. Wait a few months till the bike police are out in force and then go get your black and white helmet with POLITE written on it and your bright yellow jacket with reflective stripes....

Have you ever wondered why so many people ride motorbikes whilst wearing 'Hells Angels' type denim jackets or leathers? Well, imagine what would happen if you carved one of these salubrious characters up in your car... not a pretty sight? So you leave them plenty of space. The consequences of hitting them are quite BIG.

The scale of
BIG

Cyclist
type
BIG
(0-10)

Uniformed policeman on a bike
10

Tricycle, Bike with trailer
8

Well
lit, visible touring cyclist at the right distance from the kerb
6

Well
lit, visible touring cyclist at the kerb
3

Unlit
cyclist at night (no cycle-friendly law)
1

Unlit
cyclist in long black coat creeping along the pavement in a university
town
0
BIG
calculator

Add up the relevant
sections below and see what your own BIG is:

Bicycle
type

Road Racing bike

0

Mountain
bike

1

Bike with panniers fitted

2

Recumbent bike/Tandem

3

More than two wheels (Tricycles, trailers etc)

4

Any bike with no rear lights at night

1

Any bike, no rear lights or reflectors

0

Bonus for any number >1 of bright (>+10W) lights at night (to
a maximum of 4)

1

Clothing

No reflectives at night time

0

Dark 'natural' clothing

0

Bright jazzy patterned clothing

1

Bright solid colours / good reflectives at night

2

Stark
naked

5

Position

Taking a narrow lane

4

Creeping along the kerb

0

Just outside the car wheel tracks (medium road)

1

Just inside the car wheel tracks (medium road)

3

On a shared use path

0

Add it all up and get a score out of ten.

Your rating:

0-2

Imminent Road Kill

3-5

Bicycling Baldrick

6-8

Effective Cyclist

9-10

Road Warrior

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