



Not looking, or just can't see? The answer isn't that clean-cut...

# The beginning of the end for SMIDSY?

A pioneering new course based on groundbreaking research seeks to end 'sorry mate I didn't see you' accidents. MCN went along to find out more



It's all too common, the driver looks but then sails out into your path



## 'The key to reducing collisions is a shared understanding'

### Why now?

"Smurfit Westrock is a family-orientated business and sadly we have had a few accidents involving employees who are riders. We decided to offer free advanced training through Phoenix Motorcycle Training. We then asked Phoenix if there was anything we could do to extend the training to include non-riders, the result of which was the 'why drivers don't see motorcycles' course. We funded development and it is offered free to staff."

Dan Gurney,

MD Smurfit Westrock Bristol and Weston-Super-Mare Plants

By Jon Urry  
MCN CONTRIBUTOR

The statistics are sobering. Motorcyclists make up just 1% of the traffic on the UK's roads yet they account for 20% of fatalities with 340 deaths and 15,000 motorcycle-related injuries recorded during 2024. While solo incidents where the rider misjudges a rural bend account for some of these, interactions with other road users are a major factor with the other vehicle failing to give way – or 'sorry mate, I didn't see you' – collisions high on the scale. And now, thanks to a collaboration with Phoenix Motorcycle Training, Smurfit Westrock, Esitu Solutions and Nottingham Trent University, we have evidence as to why this is. And it's not simply a case of drivers failing to look, it is down to the fundamental biological and psychological make-up of human beings as well as their various experiences as road users.

MCN caught up with David Crundall, a professor of psychology specialising in traffic and transport psychology at Nottingham Trent University, who has spent the last 21 years researching this field to understand more about why 'sorry mate, I didn't see you' accidents happen and what can be done to stop them being repeated.

### Three key behaviours

"There are core psychological and physical reasons why drivers don't see motorcyclists," explains



Expert: Professor David Crundall

Professor Crundall. "This isn't always down to bad driving (although this is undeniably sometimes the case), it is down to our physical and cognitive make-up. When drivers interact with motorcyclists on the road they engage in three key behaviours: they must look in the right locations, then they must perceive what is in those locations and finally they must make the appropriate judgement about how to behave. Failures in any of these behaviours can result in a collision."

### We look but don't see...

"While driving, our brains build up a mental model and set of rules on how to react and interact, which are called a schemata," Professor Crundall continues. "Lots of factors influence these schemata. We build up these rules as we gain experience driving. However as they increase, they become more and more entrenched, which is why it is often harder for more experienced drivers to see motorcyclists. The problem with motorcycles is

that as they only make up 1% of the traffic, drivers don't gain much experience on how to deal with them and the habits on how to interact with the other 99% of the traffic take over. Drivers' brains aren't expecting a motorcycle to be filtering or overtaking in traffic as cars don't do this and their schemata don't contain this knowledge, so they aren't looking for it. And even if they do look, often they don't see.

"Our brains are hardwired to quickly spot big objects which might cause us harm but smaller objects take longer for the brain to see as, from an evolutionary perspective, they are less likely to harm us. This priority processing for large objects is often termed *Global Precedence Theory*. It is only tens of milliseconds but as the drivers' schemata tells them to look for a car, they look for the big object and don't spend the extra milliseconds looking for the smaller unexpected object, which is a motorcycle. The brain simply doesn't 'see' the motorcycle and assumes all is well. And even if they do properly look, they still might not see a motorcycle."

### Don't trust your eyes...

"Our eyes have blind spots and to compensate the brain 'makes up' the rest of the image to fill in this gap, which is why you don't have a black hole in your vision," says Professor Crundall. "Similarly, our peripheral vision is nowhere near as good as we think it is. While the

Continued over



With the right help drivers can learn how to see bikes

**LEARNING ON THE COURSE**

**Elliot Jackson**  
"I've been riding motorcycles for about a year and I found the course really interesting, especially as it explains why car drivers often don't see a motorcycle. I've done a bit of advanced training and this expands upon on it and has been very helpful."

**Mark Anthony**  
"I ride a bicycle but have no experience of motorcycles. What hit home to me was how you can look but not see, which wasn't something I had really considered or thought about before. It certainly opened my eyes to how easy it is to miss motorcyclists."

**Nathan Morgan**  
"My dad used to ride but I never have, so I have a degree of understanding. I have a friend who was knocked off his bike in a 'sorry mate' scenario. You almost can't believe that it can happen but the course demonstrated how easily it can occur."

**Andy Marshall**  
"My son has a motorcycle and I'm trying to educate him about the risks, which this course has helped with as I only drive cars. He doesn't wear high-vis clothing, which worries me, and I keep trying to emphasise to him how you need to make yourself visible on a motorcycle."

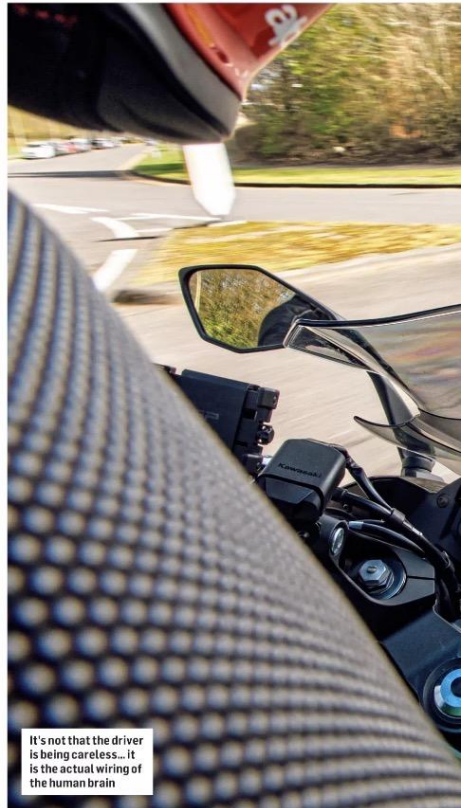
**'Even if they do properly look, they still might not see a motorcycle...'**

world looks very clear at the point we are looking at, the peripheral world is blurry and less colourful. Unfortunately, if there was something small and important in these visual problem areas – such as a motorcycle – it can get overlooked. Humans get around this by constantly moving their eyes, which gives them a more complete picture of the world, but if a driver is looking to see if a road is clear and quickly glances up the road without scanning or looking further up the road, a motorcycle could be in their blind spot. And even if they do see the motorcycle, other hard-wired issues can come into play."

**The looming effect**  
"There is something called 'the looming effect', which is an optical phenomenon that can confuse the brain," explains Professor Crundall. "Imagine you are waiting to pull out of a T-junction. You look to the right and see a car coming towards you. As the car gets close, the size of its image on the retina expands. We use this information to judge the car's approach speed. However, the narrow profile of a motorcycle means that its retinal expansion rate is much lower and can easily fall below the threshold to detect looming. This is why an oncoming motorcycle might not appear to be

getting closer... and then all of a sudden it is on top of us!"  
"At this point 'psychological bias' can also come into play. As motorcycles are small (and therefore not an evolutionary threat) a driver's decision to pull out, possibly taking a chance, can be influenced by this lack of perceived risk. However, this brings in another very interesting factor – in-groups and out-groups."

**Are you in or out?**  
"Psychologically, humans like to group themselves," explains Professor Crundall. "The 'in-group' are people who you know personally, or just think that they would be similar to you (such as fellow football fans or drivers of similar cars). Conversely the 'out-group' contains people who you do not identify with and whom you don't understand. If you don't ride a motorcycle, and don't know anyone who rides a motorcycle, any riders you see on the road will be classed as belonging to your out-group. It's much easier to interpret the behaviour of out-group members in a negative light, which can lead to anger or frustration. If you don't ride, then that filtering motorcyclist is cheating the system, maybe behaving illegally, and that angers



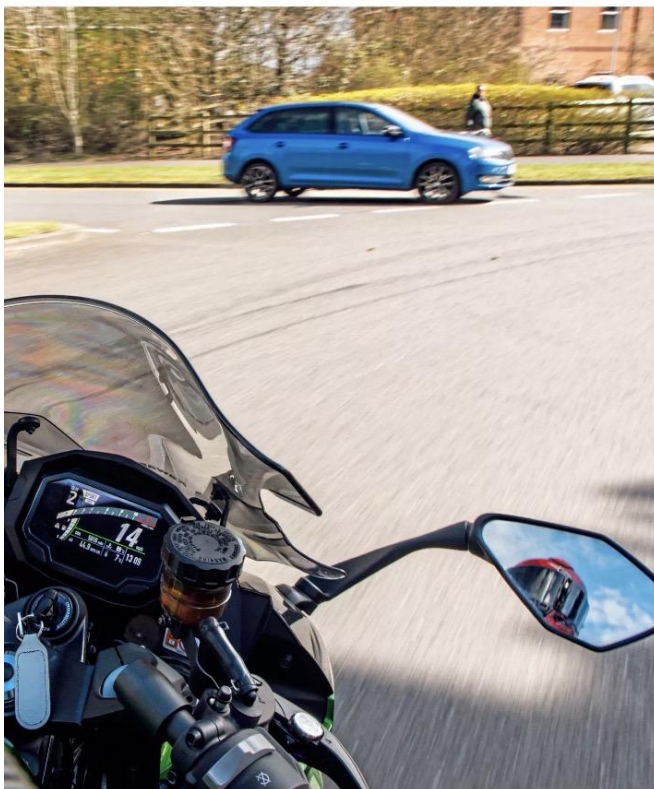
It's not that the driver is being careless... it is the actual wiring of the human brain

you. If you are a rider, however, that filtering motorcyclist is part of your in-group and you understand that they are performing a legal manoeuvre which allows them to get out of the way of other vehicles and stops them taking up a slot in the congestion. If motorcyclists are in your in-group you are much more likely to look out for them and include them in your driving schemata as you empathise with them. Also, it's highly likely you spend more time around motorcycles than the average car driver (which is just 1% remember), which has benefits. Repeated exposure helps your brain learn to quickly identify motorcycles, reducing the time it takes to recognise that a rider is heading towards you, allowing it to see a small motorcycle almost as fast as a big car with just a quick glance."

**So do motorcyclists make safer drivers?**  
"When it comes to seeing motorcycles, evidence suggests that riders are more likely to see other motorcycles than car drivers are," confirms Professor Crundall. "Also, as motorcyclists are more vulnerable on the road, this tends to make them more aware of dangers and react accordingly than car drivers. I wouldn't say that all motorcyclists are safer drivers than non-motorcyclists as individual differences and personality factors may outweigh this advantage but they are certainly more observant when it comes to seeing other motorcycles on the road as they are in their in-group."

**Can anything be done to help drivers see motorcyclists?**  
"The brain can be trained and that

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is the whole point of the course that we have developed at Esitu Solutions, based on the research conducted at Nottingham Trent University, and in partnership with Phoenix Motorcycle Training and Smurfit Westrock," says Professor Crundall. "If you are aware of the core psychological and physical reasons why you might not see a motorcyclist, you can change the way you drive to take this into account. Also, by bringing car drivers and motorcyclists together into the same 'in-group' in their minds, empathy is built up and with it more understanding and a lower likelihood of negative stereotypes influencing how a driver reacts to a motorcycle on the road."

**What can riders do to help themselves to be seen?**  
"The key to reducing 'sorry mate I

didn't see you' collisions is a shared understanding," concludes Professor Crundall. "Wearing high-visibility clothing helps but a lot of the reasons car drivers don't see motorcyclists are psychological and physical. If you understand the issues to do with looming effect, blind spots, global precedence theory and how drivers' minds work you can start to tailor your riding to take this into account. Errors will still happen, so you need to be aware and make judgements to reduce the risks by giving yourself space and time to react, but this knowledge into how a driver's brain and body work will help."

"The bottom line is that if you see a car driver at a junction and they look towards you, don't just assume they have seen you – they might have looked but not actually seen you..."



MD Dan Gurney is fully onboard

**FIXING THE PROBLEM**

Mark Jaffe has the answer



**PHOENIX M/C TRAINING**  
**'We could do it nationally'**

"Phoenix Motorcycle Training has 26 road centres and four off-road centres in the UK and our PROskills division specialise in advanced rider training. Personally, I'm very involved with the DVSA, DFT and Driving Instructors Association, as well as various lobby groups helping to improve motorcycle safety," says Phoenix boss Mark Jaffe. "Smurfit Westrock in Yate, near Bristol, approached us to organise advanced rider training for their staff that rode motorcycles for either commuting or leisure following the tragic death of one of their staff who was hit by a driver that failed to see him."

"This course, which was very positively received, was followed by an enquiry to roll out additional car driver training to all employees, to help them understand why 'Looked but failed to see' collisions occur. Hopefully it will be expanded

throughout the whole company and ideally, even further afield. "The course is delivered by Phoenix Motorcycle Training PROskills team and Esitu Solutions and I am looking at getting it out nationally to large fleet companies to help make motorcyclists safer on the roads. The likes of Amazon, DHL, Evri and anyone who uses cars around the UK can be included and it is very easy to implement as it just involves a training room. The consequences of a motorcycle rider being killed sends huge ripples through a company, as it has with Smurfit Westrock, and that could be avoided with training."

**'Rolled out to anyone who uses cars'**



Leave yourself an escape route