

## WOMEN MOTORCYCLISTS: CHILDHOOD FOUNDATIONS AND ADULT PATHWAYS

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### ABSTRACT

Women have been involved in motorcycling for almost one hundred years, but it has always been an activity dominated by men. However, recent data suggest that women are now becoming active motorcyclists in greater numbers. This study identifies variables which are related to a woman becoming a motorcyclist and the nature of the process. It also investigates the possibility that the meaning of motorcycling may be different for women. The women riders in this study reported substantial involvement in outdoor activities as a child, and they tended to be involved in competitive sports. Most reported enjoying boys' games and playing with boys prior to adolescence. Many appeared to be the products of gender neutral child rearing, especially from fathers. The most common entrance to motorcycle operation was via a boyfriend or spouse. For many of these women, motorcycling has special meaning for them as a woman.

Leisure patterns among boys and girls are known to be quite different, and may be seen as part of childhood socialization. Boys' games tend to have clear objectives and rules which reinforce the masculine characteristics of control and aggression. Girls' games tend to be less structured, and they place a greater emphasis on interpersonal skills and cooperation (Lever 1978). In their play boys are greater risk-takers, and they take greater pleasure in breaking social rules (Thorne & Luria 1986). In comparing the contents of boys' and girls' rooms it has been found that boys' rooms have a wider range of toys which include military equipment, machines and vehicles, and that boys' toys are more oriented to activities outside the home (Rheingold & Cook 1975). The sociological assumption is that childhood play patterns have an effect upon personality and activities in later life. One study has reported that professional business women are more likely to have played competitive sports as children than other employed women. These women were also more likely to report having male playmates as children (Coats & Overman 1992).

One leisure activity that involves machines, vehicles, the outdoors, risk-taking and a touch of social deviance is motorcycling. Motorcycles may also be seen as an extension of the toys common to boys. Although there have been some notable exceptions over the years, motorcycling has always been seen as a male preserve. While that may still be true in a statistical sense, there is reason to believe that increasing numbers of women have become involved in motorcycling in recent years.

Given the uncommon phenomenon of women riding motorcycles, the purpose of this study is to identify variables which may be related to a woman becoming a motorcyclist and to investigate the process whereby this occurs. Additionally, the possibility that the experience of operating a motorcycle may have different meanings for women than men is explored. The subjects of interest here are women who operate motorcycles, not women who ride as passengers or women who associate with male motorcyclists or motorcycle gangs (see Hopper & Moore 1990).

According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, human beings live in a world of symbols where meaning is attached to objects and behaviors. People define social reality through the process of social interaction. The meanings attached to motorcycles have changed over the years, and they are always open to redefinition. In the early years of motorcycles, they were largely seen as transportation, but they soon became seen as symbols of individualism and adventure. The growth of racing and daredevil shows added an element of danger and risk to the meaning of motorcycles. After World War II, the motorcycle began to be defined as the province of males, especially rebellious males. As was pointed out by W.I. Thomas (1928), when people define a situation as real, that definition becomes real in its consequences. In this case, women for the most part withdrew from the world of motorcycles. A brief review of motorcycle history will reveal the changing pattern of women's involvement in motorcycling.

Although invented in Germany in 1885, the motorcycle is a creature of the twentieth cen-

ture. The first motorcycle sold in the United States was in 1901 (Ferrar 1996), and the first Harley-Davidsons were sold in 1903 (Bolfert 1991). Because these vehicles were essentially bicycles with gasoline engines attached, women had already become involved in two-wheeled transportation via their participation in bicycling. In her book *Hear Me Roar*, Ann Ferrar (1996 17) quotes an early temperance leader's explanation of how bicycling was a symbol of liberation:

That which made me succeed with the bicycle was precisely what had gained me a measure of success in life - it was the hardihood of Spirit that led me to begin, the persistence of will that held me to my task, and the patience that was willing to begin again when the last stroke had failed.

Similar sentiments were expressed by women I surveyed who had "dropped" their motorcycle during initial efforts to learn to ride, but continued to try until they were competent riders.

The recent increase in women riders might also be viewed as a return to visibility on the part of women. The early days of motorcycling included a number of heroic and visible women. In 1915 the mother-daughter team of Avis and Effie Hotchkiss traveled from New York to San Francisco via a circuitous five thousand mile route in a Harley-Davidson sidecar rig. A year later two sisters in their twenties left New York City for California by motorcycle. Two months and fifty-five hundred miles later Adeline and Augusta Van Buren arrived in San Francisco (Ferrar 1996). This was at a time when paved roads were uncommon. During the trip these sisters became the first women to take a motorized vehicle to the top of Pike's Peak. While crossing Utah they averaged twenty spills a day and, at one point, were arrested for wearing pants in public (Stone 1994). Clearly these women were pioneers.

The involvement of women in motorcycling (including racing and daredevil shows) continued through World War II in which they served as couriers (Stone 1994). During this period of time motorcycle advertisements and promotions often included neatly attired young women as motorcycle operators (Bolfert 1991). After the war a number of factors may have coalesced to redefine motorcycling as a male enclave. The baby boom, univer-

sal automobile ownership, suburbia, television portrayals of the perfect wife and mother, and the movies may all be involved, but for whatever reason motorcycling numbers remained very small and riding became increasingly male in its image.

In 1950 there were 500,000 motorcycles registered in the United States when the population was about 150,000,000. By 1960 the number of registrations had only risen to nearly 600,000 while the population had grown to almost 180,000,000 (Motorcycle Industry Council 1995). Thus, in spite of a period of economic expansion and affluence, the relative size of the motorcycling population remained small and stable. The Fifties were the age of the automobile in America.

The period of growth for motorcycling in the United States was the 1960's and 1970's. "You meet the nicest people on a Honda" was a successful advertising slogan of the period. By 1970 motorcycle registrations numbered 2.8 million, and the peak to date was reached in 1980 at 5.7 million (Motorcycle Industry Council 1995). Motorcycles had become a toy for leisure pursuit. Therefore, when observers suggest that there are ten times more women motorcyclists now than in the fifties, the major factor is the increase in the motorcycling population.

In her recent book about motorcycling, Melissa Holbrook Pierson (1997 168) reports that the proportion of female participants among motorcyclists has remained between seven and twelve percent since the early part of the century. In her words:

In the same tradition as the news reports about motorcycling's 'new,' clean image that recur like clockwork every decade or two, word that women have finally breached the walls of one of the last bastions of implied machismo, ....has been broadcast again and again over the years.

However, there is reason to believe things really are changing. Recent data from the Motorcycle Industry Council (Tuttle 2000) estimate that 8 percent of motorcycle owners are women. In 1993 (Motorcycle Industry Council) the proportion of women riders was estimated at 7.3 percent which means that the proportion of women riders has been increasing as well as the absolute number. Approximately 10 percent of new motorcycle purchases are made by women now, and

more than one-third of the graduates of the beginning rider course offered by the Motorcycle Safety Foundation are women (Tuttle 2000). All of this suggests that women are becoming more involved in motorcycles than in recent years. The total number of motorcycle owners is approximately 5.7 million (Motorcycle Industry Council 2000). The population of the United States is approximately 276 million (Population Reference Bureau 2000), and of that number three-fourths would be 18 or older or about 207 million people. This means that fewer than 3 percent of American adults owns a motorcycle. Some people own more than one, and some people ride someone else's machine, but, generally, people who regularly ride motorcycles own one.

All of this means that motorcycling is a rare, perhaps socially marginal behavior. As uncommon as motorcycling is for men, it is far more so for women. The figures presented above indicate that about one woman in two hundred owns a motorcycle as compared to one in twenty men. This pattern of male over-representation may be observed in many other high-risk recreational activities like sky-diving and hang-gliding (Schraeder & Wann 1999).

#### **SAMPLE AND METHOD**

The subjects for this study were selected in such a way as to produce a non-probability convenience sample. Women motorcyclists are such a small part of the population that any survey technique which deliberately seeks them out is going to have limitations. The largest study to date was conducted by the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA), and it targeted members of the AMA as well as members of various women's motorcycle organizations. This produced a total of 1,255 respondents. However, the average respondent was 43 years of age with a household income of nearly \$60,000 because of the organizational nature of the universe sampled (AMA 1997).

The study reported herein is much more modest in scope and is less concerned with representative demographics. This study looks at childhood and family factors which may be predictors of a woman taking up motorcycling, the pathways which lead her to it, and the meaning of the experience to her. To the extent that commonalities exist at all, any sample of women motorcyclists

should exhibit them to some extent.

The women who participated in this study were contacted via three motorcycle listserv interest groups: Internet BMW Riders (IBMWR), Short Bikers, and Wet Ladies (a reference to the Pacific Northwest climate). An announcement of the proposed study was placed on the BMW internet list with a request for participants. Two IBMWR members who also participated in other listserv groups offered to share the questionnaire with members of their respective groups. Members of the various groups were advised they could share the questionnaire with one or two friends, but not with an entire club or organization.

The instrument employed in this study is a questionnaire containing 35 open-ended items (see Appendix). The questionnaire was electronically transmitted and returned via e-mail. The items on the questionnaire cover such things as motorcycling information, family background, childhood experiences, educational experience, introduction to motorcycles, marital status, occupation and personal perspectives on the meaning of motorcycling for women. Respondents were free to say as much or as little as they wished on each item.

Over a period of two months, fifty-nine usable questionnaires were received via e-mail and one was received via U.S. mail (N=60). Five respondents reside in England, one in Norway, one in New Zealand, and three are residents of Canada. The fifty U.S. respondents represent nineteen states. Twenty of the respondents are from New England, the Middle Atlantic or South Atlantic states — basically East Coast. Twenty respondents are from the West Coast. Five of the remaining respondents are from the Midwest, while two are from the Mountain West and three are from Texas. The coastal tilt of the sample is likely indicative of the less traditional gender roles in these areas.

Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 55 with a median of 36. Years of motorcycle operating experience ranged from 1 to 25 with a median of 4 years. As one might expect from a computer literate group, education levels are quite high. All but one respondent had some college experience, and three fourths had finished college. A third of the sample possessed an advanced degree. Approximately one-third of the respondents are married and slightly over a third are

single. The remainder are divorced or status unclear. Many of the single and divorced respondents are living in a committed relationship.

Taken as a group the respondents are serious about their motorcycling. Almost half use their bikes to commute to work, and more than half have access to two or more motorcycles. Over half report taking trips in excess of three hundred miles on a regular basis. In addition to commuting, about a third of the women ride alone frequently. Three of the respondents ride off road, and three race or have raced. About three fourths are capable of handling routine maintenance, and nearly one third have advanced mechanical skills.

Responses to the question about the brand of motorcycle ridden most often reveal that 22 women ride BMW's, 31 ride a Japanese motorcycle with Honda and Kawasaki most common, 4 ride a Harley-Davidson, and 3 ride an Italian brand. The most common engine displacement is in the 451cc. to 850cc. range with over half the sample, but all sizes are represented including 4 over 1250cc. Over half the bikes in the sample are in the sport or standard category.

### CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

A wide range of childhood socioeconomic, demographic, and residential experiences is represented among the respondents. Although these women are currently well-educated and preponderantly middle and upper-middle class, their childhood experience ranges from working class to privileged based upon descriptions provided by the respondents. About one-fourth grew up in a working class family, half in the middle class and about one-fourth would be considered upper-middle to upper class. Given the period of time when the parents of the respondents would have grown up (50's and 60's for the most part), parental educational levels are rather high. Of the ones responding to this item, about three-fourths report some level of parental college education. Perhaps this would correlate with less traditional views of gender roles on the part of parents.

Childhood residential experience among the respondents suggests a bias toward open space. In response to a question asking for a description of the type of area where they spent the greatest part of their childhood, only 9 respondents reported growing up in a

big city, while 27 grew up in a small town or rural area. Suburbs (21) were most frequently mentioned as a childhood community experience. The commonality to most of the responses seems to be frequent mention of access to the outdoors for play activities which often included boys.

In response to an item about childhood involvement in outdoor activities, half of the sample reported extensive involvement in activities such as hiking, camping, skiing, swimming, boating, horseback riding, and "playing in the woods". Less than 20 percent reported minimal involvement in such activities. The following responses are illustrative of the types of involvement found among the respondents:

-Cross country skiing, camping, sailing, archery, swimming, hanging outside, hiking, downhill skiing ... I was outside as much as possible...

-...swimming and softball in the summer, ice skating in the winter, horseback riding pretty much year-round. Just getting out and roaming the fields. The only time I was in was to eat and sleep.

Such heavy childhood involvement in outdoor activities appears to be one of the variables related to subsequent involvement with motorcycles.

Closely related and occasionally synonymous with outdoor activities is enjoyment of "boys' games" and playing with boys in childhood. Respondents were asked if, as a child, they enjoyed "playing boys' games or with boys." Overwhelmingly, they did. Over half (34) of the respondents indicated that they primarily enjoyed "boys' games" and playing with boys as a child, and one-fourth reported playing both girls' and boys' games as a child. Only seven respondents said they played and enjoyed primarily girls' games.

An interesting question involves the relative importance of personality and socialization. Did the girls come to enjoy playing with boys because they always had, or did their personalities make them more comfortable with boys activities from the beginning? In response to this and another open ended question on childhood experiences, almost one fourth of the women referred to themselves as a tomboy. Some typical responses are presented below:

-yes. Skateboards and motocross bikes. Boys were my best friends...I used to climb trees with boys too.

-yes. I shadowed my older (3.5 years) brother, playing football, hockey, GI Joes, matchbox cars, etc. Anything but sissy dolls!

-Played a lot of football and prided myself on being the only girl on the team...was able to keep up with the boys.

-I didn't mind who I played with, but in general I preferred boys' sports because the girls' sports seemed so tame...

-...I suppose it's because I mostly thought that whatever the girls were doing was lame and pointless and dull. When I was really young, I got along better and was more accepted by the boys.

-...I thought of myself as a regular ole tomboy. I was mostly into the grungy and dirty. Thinking back I guess most of the time I was with boys close to my age that would ride horses down to the river, walk to and explore caves, do mischievous pranks...yea, I was one of the boys.

-Absolutely, I was a major tomboy. I hated the "typical" girls stuff...I don't know that I had a preference for actually playing with boys...but I did enjoy the stuff that was defined as "boy stuff" more than the "girl stuff."

-...I always was hanging around the boys. Played basketball with whoever would show up after school. My two brothers and dad are very mechanical minded and I spent hours watching as they did maintenance on our cars...I actively tried to hang out with the guys. After all, they're the ones always doing the "fun" stuff.

-yes. Many of our neighbors were boys and I have a brother who had lots of local friends. Since we had a fairly large backyard, we played lots of sports — baseball, soccer, football — whenever we could. Also, since our house backed to the woods, we played a lot of "army" and other adventure games, we played hide and go seek, went on hikes and built forts, caught creek fish in nets and "studied" wildlife areas. We also played a lot of poker, and traded base-

ball and football cards when we had to bring our play indoors. All my male friends kind of disappeared when we entered junior high though. I guess it was no longer "cool" for boys and girls to play together. That made me very sad...

These responses are reflective of the experiences and sentiments of most of the respondents who enjoyed an early childhood in which gender was not a bar to vigorous, adventurous, sometime competitive, outdoor play. Very early in life most of these women enjoyed the world of boys' play. Motorcycling may be a return to that world for many of them.

In many cases entree to the male world was provided via a brother. All but fifteen of the respondents had at least one brother, and only four respondents were only children. Median childhood family size was three children. Half of the respondents were first born. This latter variable tends to be related positively to academic and occupational achievement, but negatively to participation in high risk sports for males (Leones & Nation 1996). This may mean that riding a motorcycle is more of an achievement than flirting with danger for many of the respondents, or that first born females don't follow the pattern of male first borns.

Regardless of family size and composition, a number of women reported a gender neutral approach to childbearing on the part of their parents. The following responses are instructive in that regard:

-...my father insisted that we [2 boys, 3 girls] participate in maintenance on vehicles once we reached that level (change brakes, plugs, set points, change oil).

-...my dad had custody of me...because I was treated as a child and not just a female child, I was exposed to more things that maybe only boys would have been...My dad didn't seem to keep me from doing things I wanted to do just because "girls don't do that."

-As second child in a family of six girls, I played the role of "boy child." I spent a great deal of time with my father doing "guy" things ...We fished, hunted, trapped together. He encouraged my interest in the natural world, respected my physical strength, encour-

aged me to play. I was his right-hand man until I left home at 18.

...My other sister and I were brought up (although we didn't really notice it at the time) as "people" rather than "male" or "female." Specifically female things like Barbie dolls (and most dolls generally) we weren't allowed to have...Specifically "male" toys like guns, etc. were also off-limits.

...I have four sisters so there was no one to be "the boy" who helped dad mow the lawn, change the tires, etc. so we all took turns doing boy things with my dad. I also grew-up in a sexist free neighborhood (until adolescence) and girls were welcome to join so *I would*.

-In many ways my Dad didn't distinguish between his daughters and sons. He expected me to learn how to change the oil in the family car...I also got to learn to change tires and help him do other mechanical stuff. For my Dad, being female wasn't a reason to be sheltered from doing stuff that was physically challenging.

The early childhood exposure of the respondents to outdoor activities, boys' games, and gender undifferentiated child rearing in many cases appears to have set the stage for achievement in sports and academics. Almost three-fourths of the sample participated in sports as a child and slightly over half were involved in high school or elite youth sports, usually more than one. The academic performance of these women, on average, is impressive as well. All but a few describe themselves as doing well in school and about a fourth can be described as having an excellent academic record. As noted previously, one-third have earned a post graduate degree.

In spite of the substantial exposure to outdoor activities, boys' games, gender neutral childbearing, and sports, most of the respondents report little or no exposure to motorcycles as a child. For most it was a non-issue. If it were at all, motorcycles were seen as dangerous and to be avoided in most of the respondents' families. About one-fourth had a motorcycle in the family, usually a brother (9) or father (7), while a few reported an uncle (4), neighbor (2) or friend of the family (3) who had a motorcycle. Frequently these

people would be the source of a childhood ride or even the chance to drive around a bit on a small bike. Only six respondents reported having a friend who had a motorcycle.

### PATHWAYS TO MOTORCYCLING

For respondents who had a family member, relative, or friend of the family with a motorcycle the first experience on a bike would come as a passenger at a young age. One-fourth of the respondents had ridden on the back of a motorcycle by the age of 10. The median age for first ride as a passenger was 17, while one-fourth experienced their first ride on or after age 22. The operator for the first ride as a passenger was either an immediate family member (15), friend (26), boyfriend (13), or spouse (4).

The age at first operation of a motorcycle usually followed the passenger experience by a substantial amount of time, although there were a few cases wherein a respondent operated a motorcycle having never been a passenger. The median age of first operation was 22 with 25 percent beginning after age 31. In the 47 cases in which the person providing encouragement for this initial operation was indicated, the most common response was boyfriend (18), followed by spouse (11), friend (9), and family member (8).

The age of operating a motorcycle on a regular basis is thought to come much later for women than for men. At the height of the motorcycle registration boom in the United States in 1980, the median age of motorcycle owners (mostly men) was 24 (Motorcycle Industry Council 1995). The respondents to this study began operating a motorcycle on a regular basis at the median age of 27, and one-fourth began after the age of 32. As noted earlier, most women have little exposure to or encouragement for motorcycling from family or friends as a child. Many of the respondents reported being expressly forbidden to ride on a motorcycle by their parents, and some did not inform their parents when they began to ride as a mature adult.

In a study of older riders, it was found that males tended to have their first experience as an operator in their teens (Glamser 1999). This was most often on a recently purchased bike, either new or used. The adolescent male subculture which used to value motorcycles and "hot rods" was more of a factor in encouraging participation than any specific

individual. This is in contrast to the pattern among women noted below.

Respondents were asked if they could identify any one person who was most influential in their decision to become involved with motorcycles. Of the 53 people identified, 49 were male and 4 were female. Of the 49 males, 19 were boyfriends and 15 were spouses. The remaining males were friend (6), father (4), brother (3), grandfather (1) and friend of the family (1). The four females were a friend (3) or a sister (1). Thus for over 80 percent of these riders, involvement with motorcycles was encouraged by a specific male, and in nearly 70 percent of these cases some sort of romantic attachment existed. The most common marital status while beginning regular motorcycle operation for the respondents was single (27), followed by married (16). Five respondents were divorced at the time and two were separated.

Not only is the initiation into motorcycling usually provided by men, but support for the activity is also commonly provided by men. The respondents reported that men who ride are almost always positive in their conversations with women riders. On the other hand, men who do not ride are often surprised or patronizing. The following quotes are illustrative:

-Most men who ride are supportive and enthusiastic. I've never gotten a reaction of shock, surprise or any harassment from men who ride. Men who do not ride usually give me the "How does a little girl like you ride a great big motorcycle like that?" treatment. They are often shocked or surprised.

-...male motorcyclists...are generally supportive and approving. I have never seen a negative reaction from a male motorcyclist.

-Most men who already ride are more friendly and we talk a lot about motorcycles in general...I usually find that motorcycling is the one predominantly male activity where men accept and seem to enjoy women who ride.

-Some men who ride and find out that I have a bike, well, it's like a secret handshake.

-Men who don't ride usually give me the same lecture on how dangerous it is that I get from women who don't ride.

-Apparently it's quite a turn-on. Men find women motorcyclists "exciting"...It's funny since I've been riding for over twenty years ...but others that just meet me find it cool. Especially when they find out I race.

It appears that the status of motorcyclist takes precedence over the gender of the rider. The comment about the "secret handshake" supports this explanation. Many male activities wherein women are less than welcome are prestigious, whereas motorcycling has a deviant or nonconformist image. One could even argue that the involvement of women in a devalued activity adds to its respectability, thus benefitting all participants. This may be one reason why the respondents report such positive reactions from male riders. On the other hand, it is important to note that we are dealing with middle class subjects. There is good reason to believe that among lower class male "bikers" women would not find such a warm welcome to motorcycling.

One final consideration in women's entrance to motorcycling is the importance of formal instruction. According to one author, women are five times more likely than men to enroll in a motorcycle riding course (Piereson 1997 53). Motorcycle Safety Foundation data indicate that 31 percent of persons taking its beginner course are women (Hollern 1992 10). Among the 60 respondents to this study, only 8 reported having no formal motorcycle instruction, and 11 reported advanced road race course instruction. Some of the respondents had their initial riding experience during a safety course. These women made a decision that they wanted to learn how to ride, so they signed up.

## MOTIVATIONS AND MEANINGS

Many people (especially men) have operated a motorcycle on occasion, but few people are motorcyclists. What draws and holds people to this activity which clearly has a substantial element of risk? Is the experience of motorcycling different for men and women? The women responding to this study were asked if motorcycling can be a unique experience for women. Responses were somewhat mixed on this question.

Slightly fewer than half the respondents do not see the experience of motorcycling as being much different for men and women. Examples of such a position are presented below:

-I don't think the things that I love about it are unique to women...I love the feel of the wind in my hair, the sense of being of the environment rather than passing through it in a bubble—being able to smell everything, feel the microclimates that I never knew existed before. It is total escape and the only thing that keeps me relatively sane.

-I have never felt that motorcycling was a "man's world" or "woman's world"...Everyone I know who rides likes the closeness to the environment, the feeling of the motorcycle under you as it reacts to your physical inputs, and the fact that it gives a great feeling of being ever so slightly away from the norm.

-I seem to enjoy the same things about motorcycles as the men I talk to...Loads of people write stuff about it being liberating, a bid for freedom, etc. I don't see it that way at all — it's something I really enjoy and that is it. I also really enjoy embroidery!

-I've been lucky. Maybe it's because of my size (6 ft. tall) or how and where I grew up. I never had to really fight the stigma of being female. No one has ever accused me of being overly feminine. So to ask if something is "a unique experience for women", you are asking the wrong person. I usually see the world the way a man would see it anyway.

-Bikers are bikers—and the difference in sex is irrelevant.

On the other hand, over half of the respondents report that motorcycling can be a special experience for women. The most frequent response dealt with the idea of freedom or independence. In their daily lives women are often expected take care of others — children, spouse, coworkers or elderly parents. Motorcycles can be a freedom machine as is revealed in these responses:

-Unlike a car, where the parts are hidden, and the movement is like sorcery, a motorcycle lets it all hang out, honest and upfront. You turn a key, the car goes. A motorcycle has ritual and more involvement and you're certainly at a more root level for operating it. After trying to be the perfect daughter, wife, co-worker, boss, friend, superwo-

man, and hiding everything inside, it feels good to "let it all hang out" and finally be driving my own life.

-I think riding their own bike gives women some freedom from the responsibility of taking care of others...it is probably more fun than anything we do in our daily lives.

-It also is a good way to focus the self when you have a lot of competing things going on as I always do. Biking is almost Zen-like in that it drives other concerns from the mind during the ride and you concentrate and exist very much in the moment.

Another common theme is that of accomplishment. Given the height and weight of most motorcycles, the average woman is at a decided disadvantage during the early stage of learning to ride. She often approaches the whole enterprise with very little experience, so to be successful is very gratifying. The responses below reveal this feeling of accomplishment:

-...also on the physical level, I think there is more challenge and sense of accomplishment than for a man. When you sometimes have to consciously note where and how you park your bike, so you can move it without help, or you have to really use your body weight to put it on the center stand; you know that you are accomplishing something difficult and demanding.

-Partly, I think, it's the sense of mastering something powerful, difficult and noisy... Learning to ride mine felt like a major accomplishment for me. I'd never been either athletic or particularly coordinated, and after the safety course learned to ride all on my own.

-I like the feeling of accomplishment in what I've achieved working up from a 250cc., 300 lb. low rider style bike which I could put both feet flat on the ground with to a 600cc., 450 lb. sport-bike which I can't touch on (I can only put the ball of one foot on the ground).

-I do something that a lot of men can't do, but that has more value than women's activities.

Closely related to the idea of accomplish-



ment is the idea of empowerment. Six respondents reported that motorcycling was an empowering experience for them. The following are illustrative:

-Empowerment. When I ride, I am in control of the machine and myself. When I come back from a ride, I know that it was because of me and my abilities that caused me to be back home safely.

-I think there are fewer ways in this society for women to have power and motorcycling really does give you some power...My motorcycle almost feels like when I was a kid and on a cool evening, I felt like I could just run forever.

-It's a power trip. It makes us feel competent, successful and in control in a male-dominated area. Women don't get to feel that way as often as men.

Other aspects of motorcycling that were seen as special for women included building self-confidence, a sense of control, the chance to participate in a man's world on an equal basis, and the special bond with other women who ride. For some women it appears that motorcycling has special meanings.

#### SUMMARY

The women who participated in this study are a diverse lot, but they all ride motorcycles. They have come to motorcycling by many routes, but there are some general patterns which apply to many of them. Most were raised where they had access to the outdoors, and most reported substantial involvement in outdoor activities. Most of the women were involved in sports as a child — many at the college or elite youth level. A large majority of these women enjoyed playing boys' games and with boys as a child. Most had brothers and half the sample was the first born child in the family. Many of the respondents reported a gender neutral approach to childrearing on the part of parents, especially fathers. All of the above variables can be seen as predictive of achievement in a general sense and a willingness to undertake non-traditional activities like motorcycling when presented with the opportunity.

This opportunity is usually presented by a boyfriend or spouse who brings the woman

into the world of motorcycles, and then provides support when she is ready to become an operator. This opportunity often comes relatively late in life compared to males. There are other paths to motorcycling such as growing up in a motorcycling family or deciding in adulthood to take a riding course independent of any social relationship, but the boyfriend/husband pattern appears to be most common.

The meanings of motorcycling appear to vary from woman to woman. About half believe that the pleasures they experience with motorcycles are not very different than those experienced by men. This may be more the case with young, never married women who ride sport bikes fast. However, most of the women surveyed believe that motorcycling can be a special experience for women in addition to the pleasurable aspects of riding reported by men. They speak in terms of freedom, independence, confidence, accomplishment and empowerment because they often have limited access to such feelings in their daily lives.

Taken as a group the women in this study are educated, occupationally successful, technologically and mechanically adept, outdoor oriented, and confident. They are comfortable moving about in what used to be considered a man's world. As a greater and greater proportion of women fit this description, the number of women in motorcycling should increase. This has already occurred in the occupational world. Recreational pursuits should be next.

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4. How old were you and what were the circumstances surrounding the first time you rode on the back of a motorcycle, including the relationship to the person driving (e.g., friend, parent, etc.)?
  5. How old were you and what were the circumstances surrounding the first time you operated a motorcycle by yourself?
  6. How old were you and what was your situation (school, work, marital, etc.) when you began to operate a motorcycle on a regular basis?
  7. Can you identify any one person who was most influential in getting you involved with motorcycles (no name, just sex, age, relation to you)?
  8. When you first became involved with motorcycles as an operator, what were the reactions of friends, family and relatives?
  9. Currently, how do other women who are not involved in motorcycling react when they learn you ride a motorcycle?
  10. Currently, how do men react when they learn you ride a motorcycle? Does their own experience with motorcycles seem to affect their reaction?
  11. What was your childhood (age 1-17) exposure to motorcycles through friends, family and relatives?
  12. What were the attitudes toward and/or involvement with motorcycles of friends, family and relatives when you were a child (age 1-17)?
  13. In general terms, how would you describe the economic, educational, and occupational background of the family in which you were raised (e.g., poor, working class, middle class, well-off, uneducated, well-educated, etc.)?
  14. In terms of rural, small town, big city, how would you describe the area in which you spent most of your childhood?
  15. As a child and adolescent, what was your level of involvement in competitive sports? Please be specific as to sport and level of competition.
  16. As a child, what was your level of involvement in outdoor activities? Please be specific.
  17. As a child, did you enjoy playing boys' games or with boys? Please explain.

#### APPENDIX

##### Women Motorcyclists Questionnaire (for women who operate motorcycles)

Below are a number of questions about your experiences with motorcycling as well as a number of background questions. Simply answer the questions by number (no need to type the questions) and email or surface mail your responses to me. If any questions are too personal, just leave them blank. If you have a few women friends who are motorcyclists who would like to participate, please share this questionnaire with them. However, please do not pass this questionnaire to a large number of persons as this could introduce a geographic or special interest bias into the sample. I do not need to know anyone's name or address, but if you are willing to be contacted for follow-up questions, please include a first name and email address or surface address. I may be contacted at work at (601) 266-4306 if you have any questions. My email and surface mail addresses and fax number are at the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for your time and assistance.

1. What brand, size, style of motorcycle do you currently operate most often?
2. What other bikes do you operate?
3. Describe the types of riding you currently engage in (touring, cruising, off-road, racing etc.), the distances involved, and the number of people you normally ride with.

18. Can you think of any ways in which your childhood experiences or interests were different than those of other girls?
19. Including yourself, how many children were there in the family in which you were raised? Please indicate their sex and your birth order.
20. Generally speaking, how would you describe your performance in school?
21. What is your current level of formal education (e.g., finished high school, some college, graduate, etc.)?
22. Do you have any special technical or occupational training or credentials? Please explain.
23. Many aspects of motorcycling are enjoyable to people of different ages, sexes, and social backgrounds. Can you think of any ways that motorcycling can be a unique experience for women in general?
24. What is special and/or enjoyable about motorcycling to you personally as a woman?
25. What is your current occupation?
26. What is your current marital status?
27. Do you have any children? How many and what ages?
28. What is your age?
29. In what state or region (or country) did you spend most of your childhood?
30. Have you attended a formal course in motorcycle operation and/or safety? Please explain.
31. How many years have you been operating a motorcycle on a regular basis?
32. What types of motorcycle maintenance and repair are you able to do for yourself with little assistance?
33. Other than your interest in motorcycling, are there any other aspects of your lifestyle that others might consider unconventional or high risk (e.g., skydiving, rock climbing)?
34. How did you (or the person who contacted you) learn of this study (e.g., BMW internet list)?
35. In what state (or country) are you currently residing?