

Bike Babes in Boyland: women cyclists' pedagogical strategies in urban bicycle culture

Melody L Hoffmann

Abstract

"Where are the women?" is one of the most common questions asked by those dedicated to expanding the number of cyclists on the road. Some common answers are: women do not like to ride on busy streets, are concerned with their appearance, do not feel strong enough to commute on a bicycle, and are faced with societal norms about their place in the private sphere that conflict with the independence of the bicycle. In this action note, I look at a group of women cyclists who are using various techniques that encourage women to ride bicycles and become part of a cycling community. This action note describes the Pedal Pusher Society (PPS). The group is located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, but its strategies would be helpful in many contexts. Readers who are not involved in bicycle advocacy should benefit from learning about the group's pedagogy by focusing on how they attempt to create a new space for women to enter the cycling community. I argue that activists need to recognize the inherent exclusionary environment in many social movements and must work to craft new spaces that directly address the reasons why particular groups of people are attracted to social movements.

Background



I have been following the work of PPS since its inception in 2005. Self-defined as "Milwaukee's premiere women and trans bike gang," PPS is currently composed of mostly white, middle-class women who meet up once a month to socialize and ride their bikes. Broadly speaking, PPS is a space for women cyclists to meet each other, support each other, and build personal confidence in a burgeoning urban bicycle community. PPS communicates primarily at the monthly rides and through its email mailing list. The group throws a popular annual adult prom with proceeds going to a community organization. PPS has produced two parody music videos and one prom commercial that have garnered significant online exposure, mostly through YouTube. Since PPS's

inception, the group has also received a lot of local media attention, especially around its videos and annual proms.

PPS has made it clear that it does not wish to be identified with the dominant bicycle culture. Co-founder Susie Seidelman explains, "our intention was not to carve out a place for ourselves in the dominant bike culture, but rather to create something different and new." The group fosters a collective identity that supports and fuels the group's bicycle activism, which is partially maintained vis-à-vis its online media presence. PPS maintains an important space in an automobile-privileged urban setting that discourages bicycling. The group helps women to see the potential strength and empowerment in utilizing a bicycle in urban spaces.

Context

Women who attempt to traverse the urban bicycle community often run into subtle and implicit sexism. As an experienced cyclist, I have found that in the Midwest, almost all women cyclists complain about the machismo present in bicycle shops. While there are plenty of bicycle shops that do not perpetuate this stereotype (in Minneapolis, The Hub and Sunrise Cyclery are known for being women-friendly spaces), many women avoid bicycling because of the hurdle of talking with bicycle shop employees.

The ways in which men can problematically impact women cyclists' lives was the impetus for PPS. The group attempts to create a space for women cyclists by harnessing new media technology to promote the group's mission, activism, and pedagogy. I explore their pedagogical potential by discussing its website, local media exposure, and DIY videos.

Description

pedalpushersociety.org

PPS's website is its strongest online pedagogical tool. It is an information-based site that explains its politics, goals, and past and future events. Reoccurring messages on the site include: encouraging women-identified cyclists to join PPS and creating an empowering and supportive space for women cyclists. The website also challenges normative conceptions of women cyclists and men's complacency in the marginalization of women in dominant bicycle culture.

PPS is explicit about how it negotiates new ways of thinking about dominant bicycle culture and women cyclists. The most overt political material on the site is about sexism in bicycle culture. On its website, PPS responds to men in the dominant bicycle culture who have rejected the notion of a women bicycle group:

Some men have stated that they feel like our exclusion of men in the Pedal Pusher Society is 'reverse-sexism.' By its definition sexism, racism and hetero-centrism are the combination of prejudice plus power, meaning that sexism is the

combination of social stigmas about women (prejudices) and male privilege and the power that is inherent in that privilege. Thus, those without male privilege cannot be sexist.

This section establishes the attitude and intelligence behind the group that are grounded in feminist theory. This statement sends a message that members have no tolerance for men's criticism about being excluded from the bicycle community. PPS's feminist sentiments help other women cyclists find the words to explain why women-only groups are not sexist. This statement is a pedagogical tool women can carry with them, and also makes men reevaluate what they deem to be sexist. PPS's discussion of sexism suggests that women have to grapple with issues in social movements that do not concern, but are perpetuated by, men.

Beyond PPS's attempt to envision new ways of thinking about women's place in dominant bicycle culture, PPS also tries to envision new ways for men to think about their role in creating change in the dominant bicycle culture. PPS uses its website as a venue to teach men about their own privilege. The website's section titled "Men & the PPS" explains that "PPS is challenging the male dominated bicycle culture and more largely, male privilege as a whole, but those who have male-privilege have the power to change how it's leveraged personally and systematically!"

Through its website, PPS encourages men to speak up when they witness sexist behavior and to talk with one another about how their privilege affects their lives. A popular anti-gender normativity poster is featured alongside a suggestion for men, which reads, "For every girl who is tired of acting weak when she knows she is strong, there is a boy who is tired of appearing strong when he feels vulnerable."

PPS assumes that men will visit its site for curiosity sake. The group takes this opportunity to possibly teach men about the oppression of women that runs deep in the dominant bicycle culture. The pedagogical moments on PPS's website are unlike the dominant bicycle culture's representations online. Of course this has much to do with the fact that dominant bicycle culture is oblivious to the marginalization of some of its members. Co-founder Susie argues that PPS has proven to be very threatening to some male cyclists, as their exclusion from any area of bicycle culture is unprecedented. Therefore, PPS's online presence has the ability to create effective change and/or dialogue in the larger bicycle activist movement.

Local media coverage

Beyond its website, PPS uses its local online media coverage as a pedagogical tool to promote bicycle activism and women cycling confidence. Members are often asked to speak about being women cyclists. Members describe the benefits and the obstacles they face bicycling in urban spaces. PPS understands the urban streets to be a barrier for women cyclists due to safety concerns. Safety concerns include fear of vehicle aggression and urban violence. In "Meet the

Pedal Pushers" PPS member Shea explains how she uses her bicycle as a safety mechanism.

I think as a woman I'm particularly sensitive to staying safe and very aware of my surroundings once the sun goes down in Milwaukee. It's unfortunately not uncommon for crazy stuff to go down. My bike gives me more freedom to be able to travel where I please, even at night, providing my confidence that I have a dependable, speedy way to get home. (Petersen, 2009)

Shea reaffirms the struggle women have with public safety by stressing the benefits bicycle riding has in building confidence "once the sun goes down." PPS member Leslie says that riding a bicycle makes her "feel safe all the time" (Petersen, 2009). These PPS members are role models for other women cyclists by emphasizing that a bicycle is a means to confidence and safety. They are modeling a lifestyle where riding a bicycle is naturalized, as other modes of transportation are not offered as alternative means of confidence.

The bicycle is also seen as a form of empowerment. PPS co-founder Laura believes that "being on a bike is empowering for people of all genders – it lets you take control over how you get from point A to point B" (Petersen, 2009). This local media exposure is a form of education for readers. Women who are concerned with their public safety may not only find kinship but also consider using a bicycle as a safe form of travel and find it to be an empowering mode of transportation.

PPS also addresses women's concerns with vehicle aggression on their website, in the media and in their videos. The ways in which PPS addresses vehicle aggression appears most notably in their music videos as discussed in the next section on shared consciousness.

DIY music videos

PPS's video productions benefit women cyclists and the larger bicycle community. First, the music videos address the fear of vehicle aggression. Second, the making of the videos work helps in recruitment. And third, members challenge stereotypes of women cyclists and promote group cohesion as a means to cycling confidence. The videos teach women viewers that a group of women cyclists can fight sexism, male violence, and vehicular aggression. The video productions reach beyond the confines of dominant bicycle culture which works towards the group's goal of creating a space separate from that dominant culture. And most obviously the videos are a way to make women visible in a community where they are often made invisible.

PPS has produced two music videos and one commercial. "Eye of the Tiger a la The Pedal Pusher Society"¹ is a montage of 15 PPS members biking through Milwaukee, carrying their bicycles through crowds, and dancing with their bicycles. PPS co-founder Susie explains the impact the "Eye of the Tiger" video

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8Ae1OCrle8>

had on the group:

Most of the participants had never ridden with us before, but were connected to the group through common acquaintances. We used the shoot as an excuse to get these people involved and it worked. Many of the people in that video have become some of our most active members.

Furthermore, the video garnered nation-wide exposure in the touring Bicycle Film Festival of 2008. The video acts as a localized recruitment tool but also signifies that women are organizing their own spaces in the urban bicycle community. "Eye of the Tiger" is a pedagogical tool to use in promoting confidence in women cyclists. There are multiple scenes that show the women riding as a group through Milwaukee, often taking up entire street lanes. A few women are shown performing dance moves while holding their bicycles over their heads. These images teach fellow women cyclists that they are not invisible in the bicycle community and that confidence in cycling may be increased by riding with a group. PPS women are clearly having fun and unafraid to take over street lanes and are shown to have no problems with vehicles when doing so. PPS members are sending the message that bicycles are traffic, too, and there is no need to ride dangerously close to parked cars. This video has the potential to inspire women to ride with such confidence.

PPS's second music video² is "Beat It a la the Pedal Pusher Society," a remake of Michael Jackson's "Beat It" music video. This video showcases the rebel attitude of the group. Two rival women gangs come together to watch the fight of their leaders, who are bound by their wrists using bicycle tire tubes with bicycle chains as weapons. Two women, donned in PPS shirts, break up the fight by starting a dance routine. The remainder of the video is 20 PPS members performing the actual "Beat It" dance routine from the original music video. PPS's video also includes a sub plot of two women cyclists taunting a male cyclist by verbally teasing him and yanking off his hat while he is riding. I read this scene as a fantasy of revenge for all the taunting men have done to women on bicycles. In this video members are again seen biking in groups, but what is more prevalent in this video is the demeanor and style of the women.

The women present a campy spectacle of male toughness and an alternative to it. Various scenes show PPS members spoofing stereotypical "tough guy" spaces. For example, a group of women dressed in motorcycle biker gear are shown at a bar drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and playing pool while maintaining body language that denote arrogance. The alternatives to male toughness include the bikers engaging in a bicycle chain fight that resembles ballet moves and the rival gangs breaking into a dance routine. Pedagogically, both videos argue that women can occupy spaces and roles that are inaccessible to them in dominant society. The women's counterhegemonic display (or lack) of femininity in these videos challenges stereotypes of women that by parodying the need to maintain freshness and beauty while riding.

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToOiXPGSQas>

In addition to the music videos, PPS produced a commercial for its 2009 prom³. In the commercial, the group focuses on spoofing hyperfemininity, and constructs alternative forms of femininity and sexiness. PPS members are shown preparing for the prom to the soundtrack of Pink's "Get the Party Started." PPS co-founder Susie believes that these video productions and prom are creative ways to get people involved in the group. This commercial illustrates not only another shared experience for PPS but a pedagogical tactic in dismantling stereotypes about the group: "I think there's a lot of misunderstanding about who we are and what we do, so this sort of helps to clarify it. [PPS's prom] is about trying to make Milwaukee's underground cycling community that much more fun," Susie explained in a local *A.V. Club* article, "Why the Pedal Pusher Prom will be 'the most awesome night of your life'" (Wolf, 2009).

All three videos bring an artistic element to bike activism which changes the sphere of bicycle culture and claims new spaces for women outside of the dominant bicycle culture. The new spaces that PPS claims show that women behave and develop their subcultures differently than men. PPS understands that progress will not be made by pushing the dominant bicycle culture to accept women. In Milwaukee I have observed more evident progress in fostering an energetic women cyclist community by crafting a bicycle culture that women have created and desire to be a part of.



PPS members on the streets of Milwaukee. Photo: Third Coast Digest

Conclusion

I have summarized PPS's pedagogical model in list form so readers can see how the group's strategies address exclusionary practices in the larger bicycle community and can be readily applied to any social movement struggling to

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K63TJ9XpDsY>

foster space that encourages a wide breadth of participants.

PPS's Pedagogical Model:

1. Acknowledge the exclusionary behaviors and instruct people how to talk about their exclusion.
2. Talk directly to those who may be responsible in perpetuating the exclusion and suggest ways to correct this behavior.
3. Address concerns the excluded people have with joining the social movement.
4. Demonstrate ways to simultaneously diminish concerns and use the social movement for their personal growth.
5. Experiment with recruitment tactics; focus on untapped tactics that may appeal solely to those being excluded.
6. Use any type of media to create visuals of those typically excluded from participating in the social movement as a group.
7. Counter stereotypes of the excluded group that may hinder their involvement in the social movement
8. When possible, allow those excluded to create their own spaces in the social movement.
9. Have fun.

About the author

Melody Hoffmann is a Communication Studies PhD student at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Her concentration is in Critical Media Studies and Feminist Studies. She received her M.A. in Media Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2007. Melody's research interests include bicycle activism, feminist pornography, and critical university studies. Her activist work includes union organizing, cyclists' rights, and recalling all the republican politicians in her home state of Wisconsin. She can be contacted at hoffm794 AT umn.edu