

## **Recreation cyclists, drivers, and challenges to sharing the road: An analysis of an online exchange in the United States about rights to the road**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to combine an analysis of 550 on-line responses with a review of the literature to gain insight about issues important for cyclists, motorists, and recreation practitioners. The comments, when analyzed provided a range of popular arguments about whether cyclists should have the right to the road and revealed attitudes that continue to be issues for city planners and the bicycling community. The arguments also revealed a lack of awareness about legal rights and responsibilities of cyclists and drivers. The findings from our analysis along with information from the literature suggest not only the need for improved communication and instruction regarding existing laws, but also suggest the need for better communication to the public by recreation agencies who promote bicycling.

**Key words:** Bicycling, attitudes, safety, legislation.

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### **Introduction**

In June of 2011, an article was published in a newspaper on the east coast of the United States about a person who had strewn tacks on the road (Moon, 2011). The act, portrayed as targeting bicyclists, caused several cyclists minor injuries from falls, and many more to have flat tyres. Soon after the article was posted in the online venue, comments started coming in. In the course of two days, over 500 comments were posted, providing an opportunity to take a glimpse at positions that both bicyclists and motorists held regarding their perceptions of the laws and rights of both drivers and cyclists when on the roads in the United States. The comments, when analyzed, provide a contemporary range of popular arguments about whether cyclists should have the right to ride on roads and reveal attitudes that continue to be issues for local city planners and the bicycle communities. The arguments also reveal a range of awareness about the legal rights and responsibilities of cyclists, motorists, recreational agencies

that promote cycling, and an accompanying range of underlying beliefs about roads and their use.

Two significant issues seem to contribute to some of the confusion about bicycling laws on public roads. First, the laws for car drivers and bicyclists vary in each state and second, education of both cyclists and motorists regarding bike safety and the laws are not adequate (Hurst, 2007; Mapes, 2009). The lack of education about cycling in general, together with the lack of clear guidelines for indicating where a cyclist can be, contribute to the frustration of both riders and motorists who may be willing to share the road but have only a vague awareness about their actual legal rights and responsibilities. Recreational bicyclists and people who write about bicycling have long been familiar with the challenges of helping motorists and bicyclists share the road. Part of the challenge, as many have noted, comes from a set of national values about the right to travel in automobiles. Mapes (2009) suggested that we are a country reliant on the conveniences and decisions that cars afford: “it’s hard to change decades of relying almost exclusively on the automobile” (p.17).

When bicycle advocates focus on the challenges of sharing the road, they often point to the attitudes each group has for the other, and the challenges that come from inadequate knowledge of the laws. For example, if you ask some motorists to describe cyclists, they often argue that the cyclists ignore the laws of the road while they, the motorists, are forced to pay attention and honour those laws (Mapes, 2009). But cycling advocates point out that motorists often are unaware of the laws and the way they change. For example, In Idaho, where it has been legal since 1982 for a bicyclist to choose what he or she will do, to either yield at a stop sign or come to a full stop depending on the situation, motorists still don’t know this law and complain that bicyclists don’t stop at stop signs, that they move through a red light intersection without waiting (Mapes, 2009). Virginia is another example of a state that recently approved legislation that makes it legal for a bicyclist or a motorcyclist to pass through an intersection when the light is red after waiting 120 seconds, provided that it is safe to do so (Greason, 2011). Similarly, twenty states require a car to wait, when passing a bicycle, until they can safely pass and keep three feet away from the cyclist; thirty states have not adopted this law (Safe Cycling, 2011). Differences among state laws contribute to motorists’ and cyclists’ confusion.

Cycling advocates, when exploring the challenges for bicycles on roads also point to the lack of a system that educates drivers and bicyclists on the rules of the road. Our current drivers licensing system is in need of many changes to better improve the safety on the roads (Straus & Gu, 2009). Straus and Gu found that not only are our visual tests antiquated, and our ways of assessing shifts in cognitive abilities limited, but we don’t have a way of consistently checking in with drivers to inform them of changes in the rules of the road. While the ideal

motorist would perhaps review state documents to see if the rules have changed, or to note the differences at a state level, little in the current system encourages this kind of attention.

Bicycling researchers and advocates give us a sense of the challenges in riding bicycles. However, data that can help us ascertain more about attitudes are lacking. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to combine an analysis from an online venue with the literature to gain more insight about issues important for cyclists, motorists and recreation practitioners that promote cycling. The following discussion of comments suggests the challenges at stake in attempting to address bicycle safety for those who participate in recreational bicycling.

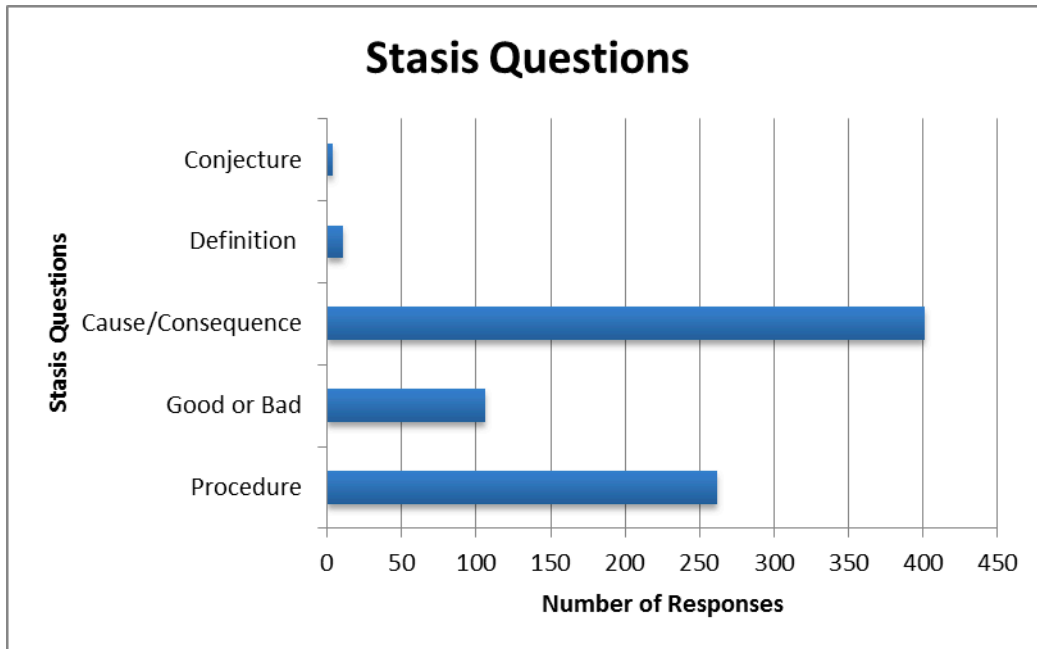
## **Method**

For the purposes of this article, we analyzed 550 on-line comments using a qualitative classificatory coding system based on a traditional rhetorical exploration of stasis (Corbett & Eberly, 2000). Corbett and Eberly articulate a contemporary version of the five classic questions that help to determine stasis (conjecture, definition, cause and consequence, value, and procedure) that was shaped to these comments as follows: was the post offering a position on conjecture (i.e., were these tacks really an act of sabotage?), a position of definition (how would that act of sabotage be defined?), a position of cause and consequence (what actions led to this act), a position of value (were tacks on the road a good and just act or a bad and unjust act), and positions regarding procedure (what should be done to prevent future acts against cyclists). While there were 550 responses, 512 were viable for coding once comments deleted by administrators were eliminated. Several participants offered more than one post, often participating in an exchange with other writers. Two hundred and seven (207) participants contributed to 108 threads, and most of the people participating within a thread understood that they were contributing to a particular debate.

## **Results**

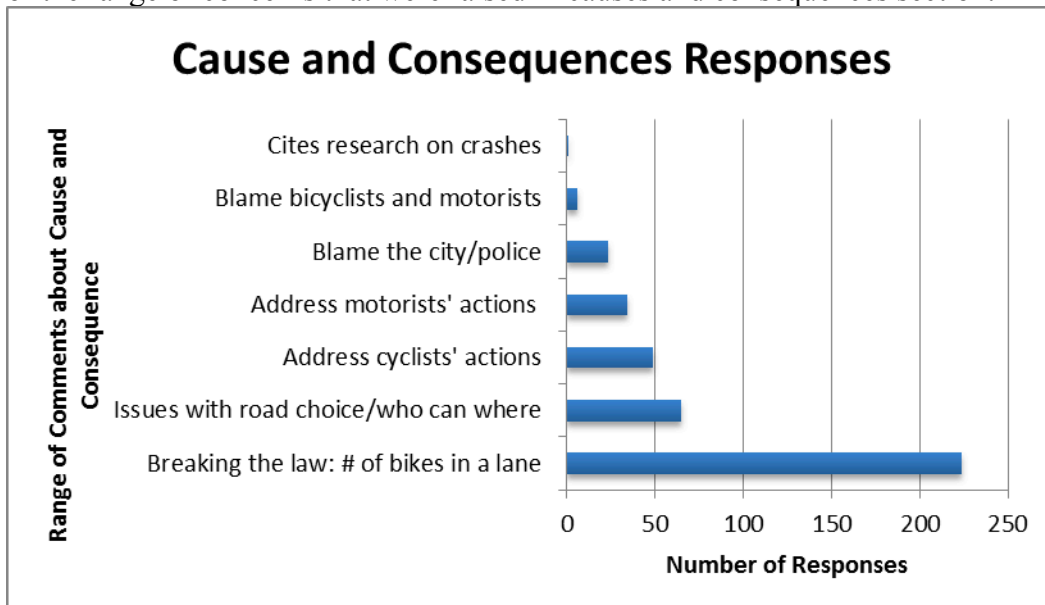
The researchers sought to identify and highlight major themes from an on-line medium to gain more insight about issues important for cyclists and motorists. In this case, the author of the original article argued that tacks were strewn on the road causing a road hazard for bicyclists (Moon, 2011). Only a small number of responses fit into either questions of conjecture (did this happen) or definitions (what will we call this). Because of the nature of the event, the online commentary often called for a self-positioning on whether this was a good or bad, a just or unjust act (question of value). The largest amount of responses, four hundred and one of the posts, either offered a theory about the cause or consequence or responded to someone else's theory about the cause or

consequence. Figure 1 identifies the response rate for the stasis questions.



**Figure 1:** Number of Responses for Stasis Questions

For the purpose of this research, we have chosen to focus the remainder of the results analysis on the questions of cause and consequence because the beliefs about the perception of cause may help recreation practitioners that promote bicycling activities better plan and help cyclists. Figure 2 provides an overview of the range of concerns that were raised in causes and consequences section.



**Figure 2:** Number and range of comments about cause and consequence

Of the 401 comments regarding cause and consequence, 55 percent (224) explored the laws regarding bicycling and passing bicyclists. Figure 3 further divides the comments about breaking the law and the number of cyclists allowed in a lane.

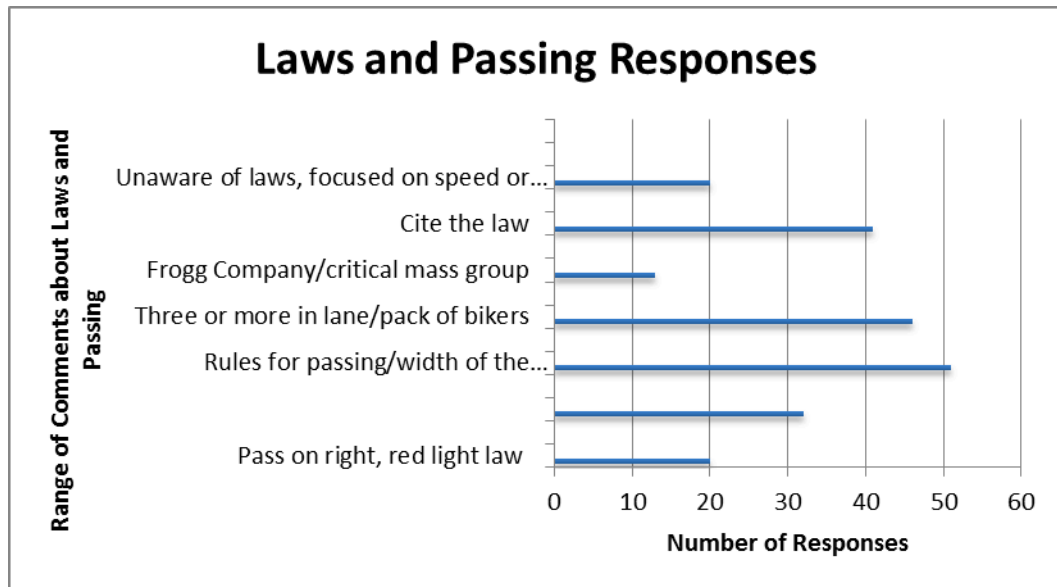


Figure 3: Number and range of comments about laws and passing

Some of the comments about laws and passing indicated a lack of awareness of existing laws. Others merely posted the laws, assuming the wording was clear. Still others gave interpretations of the laws that conflicted with other poster’s interpretations. One of the key debates concerned when and how to pass bicyclists. Bicyclists expressed frustrations with cars that passed too closely. One contributor’s post suggests this position. He described drivers as “too impatient,” “pass[ing] in a no passing zone, pinching [him] to the shoulder.” In response to harassment, bicyclists cited the option of riding in larger groups as a way to decrease risks. Another cyclist argued that he was “tempted to ride in a big group” to avoid being harassed as a “lone cyclist.” Motorists expressed frustration with the groups (or “packs”) of bicyclists because they take more time to pass, because bicyclists act arrogant in these groups: “Maybe, some of these bicyclists who think they own the road and are not subject to traffic laws need to get their inflated egos under control.”

A lone cyclist is unable to demand as much space on dangerous roads as two or more cyclists might, and as cyclists increasingly choose to ride in groups, the debate on the comments suggests the lack of an understanding of what the law argues with regards to passing cyclists. For example, the law suggests that the bicyclist should keep to the right on the road—as much as is practicable. For some in the discussion, this meant that the bicyclist should never enter the

driving lane. For others, the driving lane is the only logical space, given the potential hazards at the side of the road. For drivers, the assumptions about where the bike should be on the road is crucial for passing cyclists. If the bicyclist is three feet into a driving lane on a curvy road where a double line exists for much of the road, the driver cannot safely pass the bicyclist without breaking the law. To give the three feet of space demanded by law, the tyres of the car would have to pass over the center double line.

Some cyclists, trying to ride defensively, noted that they will often mark that it is unsafe to pass on certain stretches of road by riding two abreast (i.e. side by side), taking up the same space that a car would. A car then is either forced to take a greater risk or slow down for that stretch of road, and follow patiently behind the slow moving bicycles. Motorists claimed that this is illegal behavior and that the law clearly states that cyclists must ride in single file when there are cars present. Cyclists claimed that motorists cannot pass on these particular stretches of road safely, and therefore, it's a moot point and that the cyclist has the right of way. When 24 participants weighed in on this particular information, 13 used this information to argue for bicycles hugging the curb and not riding two abreast. Nine argued for the right to take the claims, and one person simply quoted the statute without comment or indication of position. What becomes clear is that the laws and the explanations of the laws need to be better clarified, and bicyclists and car drivers need more interactions to clarify their reasons.

It makes sense that car drivers would want to know the law, and would interpret the law in the ways that would serve their interests. It also makes sense that bicyclists would determine their sense of safety and danger. For practitioners who are facilitating recreational bicycling, it may be helpful not only to articulate the actual law but to also suggest the social laws at play. It makes sense to consider the opposition's point of view. It may make sense as well to work locally on perceptions and information dissemination.

### **Bad press for the company encouraging recreational cycling**

The set of comments that focused on a specific recreation company proved to merit inclusion in the analysis of relevant issues for cyclists and drivers. Fat Frogs, a local bicycling store, facilitates the scheduling of bicycling groups. Drivers expressed anger about the role Fat Frog might play in adding to traffic congestion. Fat Frogs may have reached out effectively to the local pro-bicycling community, but the comments suggest the possibility that it may also be necessary for recreational bicycle organization to reach out to those who have animosity towards bicyclists. The following quote from a participant was a common theme:

Perhaps Fat Frogs should take some of the blame for this. Over 200 cyclists in

one weekend is not a trivial number of people. Their site says “Fat Frogs Bike and Fitness hosts group rides seven days a week. There are no limits on how many people join these rides and who know who else organizes rides through the same areas. Smaller groups taken through a wider variety of areas spreads people out and makes it much less predictable for sick people who would sabotage regular routes (248).

This comment suggested the possibility that the public—at least those interested in reading and responding to an online newspaper article—might also be interested in understanding how to improve conditions for both bicyclists and riders. While Fat Frogs may be doing everything well—choosing a variety of routes to reduce the amount of riders cycling out at one time, shaping rides that are low risk for new riders, they fail to make it clear to the larger public that they are attentive to the concerns of others. This is a public that includes the above respondent, someone willing to look up Fat Frog’s web site, so the company could use that resource to reach these audiences.

## **Discussion**

The findings from our analysis of the online data suggest that there is a problem with how laws are described and interpreted. Bike safety is related to a shared sense of the rules of the road that both motorists and cyclists can adopt. Both the laws and the processes of educating the participants seem to be in need of attention. First, the laws applicable to bicyclists that are described to motorists in driving manuals need to be clearer. Virginia’s motor vehicle manuals might be better, were they to follow the state of Maryland’s lead when discussing bicyclists because the language contextualizes the law within the actual experiences of drivers and cyclists. For example, one of the guidelines states the following:

Expect to find a bicyclist on all types of roads (except interstate highways and toll facilities), at all intersections and roundabouts, in all types of weather, and at all times of the day and night. Bicyclists may ride out in the travel lane for their own safety due to narrow roads, or to avoid obstacles or pavement hazards. On roads without shoulders, or with cars parked along the right side, often the safest place for a bicyclist to ride is in the center of the lane. In Maryland, a bicyclist may use the full lane even while traveling substantially below the speed of traffic if the lane is too narrow for a car to safely pass a bicycle within the lane). Before opening a car door, check for bicyclists who may be approaching from behind (Maryland MVA, 2011, p. 17).

While Maryland’s law in this case is similar to Virginia’s, the actual description allows for clarification on where a driver might find a bicyclist (and why).

In addition to problems that arise because of inadequate driver information and education about laws, bicyclists in the United States may have never been exposed to any rules about bike safety (Hurst, 2007; Mapes, 2009). While some bicyclists participate in group rides that require riders to sign a safety pledge (Bike Ride Across Georgia, 2011), the rules can be open to a range of interpretations. For both the state vehicle guides and the recreation agencies, more elaborate guidelines and interventions are necessary. This might include a range of strategies for communicating the rules and the safety regulations. When laws are understood, and when both bicyclists and motorists have a stronger grasp on both the legal rights and the social “rights,” we may see less signs of frustration from either group.

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