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# The Perceptual World

by Robert Summer and Dale F. Lott

Compared to the automobile driver encased in his fume-spewing machine, the cyclist is in perceptual contact with other riders and his surroundings. He waves to friends, talks to other cyclists, gets chased by dogs, has first hand experience of wind, rain, odors from burning leaves, and the vicissitudes of time and season. Riding alongside a friend and talking together is one of the major attractions of cycling. It is far more fun than riding front and back where conversation is difficult and there can be no sharing of perceptual experience.

The cyclist's attitudes can provide clues to his behavior in traffic. While the experienced cyclist feels fairly confident about being able to predict the behavior of motorists (or else he would not survive long), motorists frequently regard the behavior of cyclists as capricious and irrational. They wonder why cyclists do not pull over to the right when an automobile wants to pass and continue to ride two abreast on city streets.

They see cyclists riding on the wrong side of the street, ignoring red lights, and otherwise acting as if traffic regulations did not apply to them. Some of these complaints are exaggerated but others are justified and indeed are reasonable adaptations to the anomalous position of the cyclist in a traffic system designed for automobiles and pedestrians.

The foremost consideration for a cyclist, compared to the automobile driver, is the realization that his vehicle lacks any kind of defensive armor. He is more vulner-

able and if a collision occurs between an automobile and a bike, it will be the cyclist who is injured.

On the positive side, his vehicle is more maneuverable and the enforcement practices of the police give him more freedom to make use of that maneuverability. Police generally overlook minor infractions of traffic regulations such as going through stop signs or making right turns without stopping. When a cyclist violates a law, the main risk is to himself. When an automobile driver violates a law, there is an even greater risk to pedestrians and an equal risk to other drivers. For these reasons, the police tend to be tolerant of the cyclist who ignores minor regulations and cyclists are aware of this attitude.

We found in one study that cyclists chose a route which contained several stop signs, which they readily ignored once it was ascertained that the intersection was clear. Automobile drivers going to the same destination chose a route with several traffic lights rather than stop signs, because 50% of the time they would have a green light and proceed without stopping.

The cyclist knows that his vehicle is extraordinarily vulnerable to theft. Chains can be cut and the entire vehicle can be loaded on the back of a pickup truck in a matter of minutes. The lack of statewide registration makes it unlikely he will see his stolen machine again. This is one reason why he likes to park close to his destination so that he can keep an eye on it from a window.

The cyclist's desire for convenience and safety, his feelings of

vulnerability at intersections compared to automobiles, can explain why he will take shortcuts across intersections rather than wait to make a two-stage recommended right angle turn, or why he parks his bike in front of the store where he shops rather than use a bike stand out in the middle of a parking lot which is more exposed to damage and theft. His vulnerability in tight traffic can explain his reluctance to use hand signals which involve removing his hands from the bars. The extreme maneuverability of the bicycle enables him to avoid obstacles such as car doors that open in front of him, and this maneuverability increases the safe carrying capacity of bicycle lanes.

While cyclists often complain about the arrogance of automobile drivers, we have found that the cyclist has a special brand of this virus himself. There is a kind of moralistic belief in the inherent superiority of one's machine over any other mode of transportation. With some justification, the bike rider believes that his vehicle isn't noisy or polluting and uses very little of the earth's scarce resources. This can produce a sanctimonious attitude reflected in a demand for special rules applying to cyclists, such as parking rights directly in front of stores rather than a block away, the right to ride through pedestrian areas, and even to treat pedestrians the way some automobile drivers treat cyclists.

No account of the cyclist's psyche would be complete without the mention of positive experiences of riding through traffic past stalled automobiles whose license and insurance cost twice the pur-

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chase price of one's vehicle. Nicholas Johnson, the public's representative on the FCC and the author of *How to Talk Back to Your Television Set*, does some of his best thinking while riding across the bikeway system in Washington, D. C. Unlike his fellow bureaucrats who arrive in their black limousines, Johnson is in contact with office employees, street sweepers, policemen, and the other denizens of the city streets.

Playwright William Saroyan listed the qualities that cycling taught him by the age of sixteen: style, speed, grace, purpose, value, form, integrity, health, humor, music, breathing, and finally and most important of all for Saroyan the writer, the relationship between the beginning and the end.

At long last it seems that the predominance of the automobile in traffic planning is coming to a close. The result hopefully will be a mixed transportation system which fits the unique requirements of pedestrians and cyclists as well as automobiles, busses, and mass transit riders.

It will take hard work to insure that bikeways are engineered to fit the cyclist's psyche as well as some non-riders' notions of what cyclists want to do and where they want to go. We have to beware of phantom or token solutions such as marked "bike routes" that lead nowhere and provide no protection or worse, a false sense of protection. It is an error to look upon cycles as miniature automobiles. The bicycle is a unique vehicle and if bikeways are not designed with its special properties in mind, they will not be used, safe or convenient. 

