

1. New voices



Why teenage girls have fewer real opportunities to ride a bike than teenage boys

New voices

02 February 2022

By combining several methods, this sociology thesis shows that urban, mobility and sport socializations are highly gendered during adolescence, leading to generally more limited real opportunities for girls to practice cycling. The analysis of variations between young people of the same gender illustrates how cycling both reveals and helps to construct social relations based on sex, age, class and territory. This thesis was awarded the New Voices Award in 2021.

Research participants

- David Sayagh

New Voices Awards 2021

Thesis title: Why teenage girls have fewer real opportunities to ride a bike than teenage boys

Country: France

University: IFSTTAR (Université Gustave Eiffel)

Date: 2018

Research supervisor: Francis Papon (Main Supervisor) et de Vincent Kaufmann

1. What is your research theme? What thesis do you defend and what is novel about it?

The aim was to study why adolescent girls cycle significantly less than teenage boys. The thesis defends the idea that they generally have fewer real opportunities to do so. What makes it novel is that, while reminding us that any cycling in the public space is significant both in terms of mobility and of physical activity, it is useful to take an approach that combines urban sociology and the sociology of mobility with the sociology of sport. The thesis also has a particular theoretical framework ¹, in that it combines discussions around the concepts of motility ² and capabilities ³, with dispositionalist theory ⁴ and the sociology of gendered social relations. ⁵ This approach allows us to analyze how the social constructions of the gendered ways in which people think about and engage with physical activity and urban space, translate into differentiated mobility potentialities, reinforcing male domination.

2. If your thesis involves empirical research, what does it consist of?

The thesis is based on both quantitative and qualitative methods. The first step was to examine the 2008 National Transport Survey ⁶ to understand whether certain socio-spatial determinants of cycling practices impact girls and boys to a significantly different degree. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews (with 82 teenagers and 26 of their parents) were then carried out in various socio-spatial environments in the cities of Montpellier and Strasbourg. The goal was to ascertain to what extent the gender gap is the result of different socializations. To the same end, three complementary studies were conducted based on a corpus of bicycle pictures, electronic discussions from the Ados.fr website, and digital articles about cycling that promoted thin female legs.

3. What are the main results?

The results reveal a process of gendered cycling socialization, reinforced during adolescence by social injunctions (parents, peers, media, bicycles, clothing), and differentiated according to body aesthetics, risk-taking, physical activity and street presence. The injunctions that weigh particularly on girls lead to a skills deficit ⁷ as well as to the incorporation of certain ways of being, thinking and acting (avoiding strenuous activity, taking risks, moving alone, venturing far, occupying the public space ⁸) that considerably limit their opportunities to practice cycling. Meanwhile, boys generally see their opportunities for cycling increase. For them, bikes represent an ideal instrument for the construction of a dominant masculinity based on the occupation of public space and risk-taking. This gender gap is more pronounced in working-class areas, especially in socially deprived neighbourhoods ⁹, while it tends to be less significant within the cultural fringes of the middle and upper middle classes, where bicycles commonly serve as an instrument of social distinction, by exercising control over one's body/health and showing respect for the environment.

4. What is your contribution to political and theoretical debates?

In a context where the National Sport Health Strategy ¹⁰ relies heavily on health and environmental policies, the thesis suggests that reducing inequalities in access to public space should be a priority. By shedding light on the social origins of women's reduced

access to public space, it alerts politicians to a very common pitfall: believing that achieving gender parity in terms of the modal share of cycling is synonymous with equal access to public space. This would require women to feel as free as men to ride their bikes in traffic, to cycle alone at night regardless of their outfits, to venture where they want, etc. Investing massively in separate and well-lit cycling facilities isn't sufficient to achieve this. Action must be taken on the processes of gender construction, particularly at the educational level. For instance, the program "Knowing how to ride a bike" ¹¹ (Savoir rouler à vélo), launched by the government in 2019, should be rolled out in middle-schools, and the actors involved should be trained in gender issues.

5. What new research avenues do your conclusions open up?

Through a more contextual and intersectional approach, the thesis invites us to further study the relationship between different processes of socialization - urban, mobility, sport, ecological and health (Figure 1) - by analyzing cycling as both revealing and serving as an instrument of distinction. Indeed, on the one hand, it seems important to study in more detail the contexts that change people's mobility potential according to the skills and ways of being, thinking and acting that they have incorporated over the course of their lives; on the other, we must further analyze how they use these resources to manage the multiple, variable and often contradictory injunctions they are subject to, according to their age, gender and sexual orientation, as well as their socio-economic, cultural, residential and even religious backgrounds.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.espacetemps.net/articles/etudier-des-inegalites-dalternatives-de-mobilite-a-velo/>
- 2 <https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/reperes/motilite-451>
- 3 <https://koppa.jyu.fi/en/courses/134525/spring-2014/Sen-Concept-of-Development.pdf>
- 4 <https://journals.openedition.org/lectures/469>
- 5 <https://journals.openedition.org/sociologie/687>
- 6 <https://www.statistiques.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/enquete-nationale-transports-et-deplacements-entd-2008>
- 7 https://www.persee.fr/doc/aru_0180-930x_2017_num_112_1_3246
- 8 <https://journals.openedition.org/efg/2512>
- 9 <https://www.insee.fr/fr/metadonnees/definition/c2114>
- 10 <https://www.sports.gouv.fr/pratiques-sportives/sport-sante-bien-etre/Plan-national-sport-sante-et-bien-etre/Strategie-Nationale-Sport-Sante-2019-2024>
- 11 <https://www.education.gouv.fr/lancement-du-programme-savoir-rouler-velo-5258>

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Motility

[En savoir plus](#) x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- [Alternative mobilities](#)
- [Change in practices](#)
- [Inequalities](#)
- [Leisure & tourism](#)
- [Representations](#)

Policies

- [Reducing inequalities](#)
- [Cycling & Walking](#)

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1 <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mobilithese/2020/08/31/second-edition-new-voices-prize-13422>