

NOTES AND SHORTER COMMUNICATIONS

Mad, bad or sad? The personality of bikers

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Summary—Eysenck Personality Profiler (EPP) scores of 29 motorcycle enthusiasts were compared with population norms separately by sex. Male bikers ($n = 22$) appeared as tough, aggressive, dogmatic, sensation-seeking, impulsive, risk-taking, irresponsible and lacking in self-esteem and ambitiousness. They were also significantly anxious and depressed compared with male norms. The female sample ($n = 7$) was too small for many significant differences to appear, although, even then, the lack of ambitiousness among bikers was replicated ($P < 0.01$). These results are generally in accord with the public image of bikers as adventure-seeking drop-outs and support the construct validity of the EPP as providing an accurate, detailed picture of personality.

Motor-cycling is a notoriously dangerous mode of transport, so we might suppose that those who engage in it would be risk-takers more generally. In addition, those who ride motor-bikes as a sport or hobby ("bikers") are widely believed to fit a particular personality profile, including "macho" tendencies such as toughness, aggressiveness and sensation-seeking and an inclination to drop out from conventional society in order to pursue a free, hippy-style existence (lack of achievement-orientation). It is also widely supposed that the activity of biking is adopted as a means of dealing with feelings of frustration and inadequacy, the power of the engine between the legs and speeds attained providing a substitute for a perceived lack of personal potency. Of course, if the adaptation were completely successful the self-concept might seem unimpaired, but if it partially failed as a self-treatment mechanism, low self-esteem, insecurity and unhappiness would be detected on a personality profile. This study was intended to investigate these hypotheses.

METHOD

Ss were subscribers to *Bike* magazine who went on a week-long rally to Bol d'Or, France, called "Bol Bash". The flavour of this excursion can be gathered from the advertisement in the magazine: "We're going to invite everyone on the trip to write about their most memorable part of the trip—assuming you can remember any of it. Wonderful roads, bars, incidents and maybe even the race itself are all prime subjects". The return coupon reads, "I wish to go mad on the *Bike* Bol Bash, 1991".

The questionnaires used were the Eysenck Personality Profiler (EPP; Eysenck & Wilson, 1991) which measures an array of 21 primary personality traits as well as giving summary scores on the "big three" factors (E, P and N) and a tailor-made questionnaire designed to elicit demographic details and attitudes toward the practice of biking. These were offered to participants at "Bol Bash" and returns were obtained from all those who accepted questionnaires (22 males and 7 females). The mean age in years for males was 29.9 (SD 3.6) and females 29.4 (SD 6.3). The mean number of years riding was 10.7 and mean number of crashes per year 0.1.

RESULTS

Because there are known to be significant sex differences on some of the EPP variables (Marchant-Haycock & Wilson, 1992) males and females were analysed separately. Means of the male bikers on personality traits and differences from male population norms are shown in Table 1. In order of magnitude, the bikers are distinguished from controls on the following traits: they are less ambitious ($P < 0.001$), less responsible ($P < 0.01$), more sensation-seeking ($P < 0.01$), lower in self-esteem ($P < 0.01$), more aggressive ($P < 0.01$), tough-minded ($P < 0.02$) dogmatic ($P < 0.02$), risk-taking ($P < 0.05$), impulsive ($P < 0.05$), and generally adventurous ($P < 0.05$).

Because there were so few women in the sample (only 7) it was unlikely that significant departures from female norms would be detected. Nevertheless, the lack of ambitiousness among the bikers was replicated in the females, their mean of 30.33 being significantly different from the female norm of 19.21 ($P < 0.01$).

Some internal comparisons within the biker sample were also made, even though the numbers in the subdivided samples were so small that only the most striking differences would be statistically significant. When bikers were split on the basis of self-declared income into those that were "respectable" ($n = 10$; earning more than £17,000 per year) and those that were "skint" ($n = 5$; the unemployed, students or manual workers) "skint bikers" were found to be more hypochondriacal ($P < 0.02$), more expressive ($P < 0.002$), less casual ($P < 0.05$) and less autonomous ($P < 0.05$). Divided according to recklessness (fast riding and/or having points on the licence, $n = 13$; vs slow, safe riding, no endorsements and/or pillion passengers, $n = 16$), the more reckless riders were significantly distinguished by scores on toughness ($P < 0.05$) and a

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Table 1. Comparison of male bikers ($n = 22$) with male population norms ($n = 1044$) on EPP variables. (Bipolar variables are scored in the direction of the second named adjective.)

	Male population		Male bikers		t^a	df	P(2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Active/inactive	12.95	7.27	15.64	6.55	1.926	21	
Sociable/unsociable	13.14	8.31	16.73	9.59	1.756	21	
Expressive/inhibited	23.19	6.17	22.36	4.82	-0.808	21	
Assertive/submissive	15.32	6.94	18.00	8.64	1.455	21	
Ambitious/unambitious	17.49	7.82	25.14	7.60	4.721	21	<0.001
Dogmatic/flexible	25.23	5.68	22.59	4.38	-2.827	21	<0.02
Aggressive/peaceful	26.14	6.77	22.73	5.52	-2.898	21	<0.01
Inferiority/self-esteem	31.61	7.59	26.95	7.22	-3.027	21	<0.01
Unhappy/happy	32.77	7.77	28.18	9.24	-2.330	21	<0.05
Anxious/calm	30.66	7.58	27.36	6.73	-2.300	21	<0.05
Dependence/autonomy	32.48	5.95	30.64	5.29	-1.631	21	
Hypochondria/sense of health	36.61	4.32	34.95	4.53	-1.719	21	
Guilt/guilt freedom	32.88	6.73	33.00	4.81	0.117	21	
Obsessive/casual	27.57	6.48	29.64	5.14	1.889	21	
Risk taking/careful	18.81	6.99	15.77	5.68	-2.510	21	<0.05
Impulsive/control	22.04	7.54	18.59	6.74	-2.401	21	<0.05
Irresponsible/responsible	23.11	7.41	18.59	6.31	-3.360	21	<0.01
Manipulation/empathy	22.08	6.70	20.55	8.22	-0.873	21	
Sensation seeking/unadventurous	17.04	7.35	13.68	5.14	-3.066	21	<0.01
Tough minded/tender minded	15.11	5.65	12.73	4.28	-2.068	21	<0.02
Practical/reflective	19.70	7.27	16.09	7.25	-2.336	21	<0.05
Low dissimulation/high dissimulation	12.08	6.86	10.36	5.34	-1.511	21	
Extraversion/introversion	19.07	6.99	20.45	6.73	0.962	21	
Emotional/stable	32.08	6.63	30.10	6.14	-1.513	21	
Adventurous/cautious	19.70	6.99	16.57	6.23	-2.357	21	<0.05
Can't decide	24.87	31.48	23.36	24.13	-0.294	21	

^a t -tests were based on the formula

$$t = \frac{ms - mp}{SD_s / \sqrt{N}}$$

where ms = mean of sample, mp = population mean, SD_s = standard deviation of sample and N = number in sample.

tendency to use the "can't decide" response category more than twice as frequently ($P < 0.05$). Toughness was also the only trait to distinguish the 22 men from the 7 women ($P < 0.001$), female scores being twice as "tender" as those of men on average (23.33 vs 12.73).

DISCUSSION

These results support the widespread stereotype of bikers as unambitious, irresponsible, sensation-seekers. Interestingly, on their own self-report they are inclined to be unhappy, anxious and lacking in self-esteem. One possible interpretation of this finding is that the bike and the speeds obtained with it are adopted in order to bolster a flagging sense of self-esteem, even though this adaptation is apparently not completely successful. However, it should be acknowledged that this is a fairly small sample of bikers who had assembled for a particular purpose (a sociable holiday) so findings may not apply to motorcyclists in general.

These results also support the construct validity of the EPP, illustrating that specific traits can be used to paint a picture of personality that may be obscured if only the "big three" factors are measured. Although male bikers were significantly anxious, depressed and low in self-esteem compared with male population norms they did not appear as more emotional (neurotic) overall. Similarly, although they showed some socially assertive traits (aggression and dogmatism) their lack of ambition cancelled out any general tendency towards extraversion. The bikers did, however, appear as generally adventurous (the third main factor, similar to the P score on the EPQ).

REFERENCES

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