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FEMALE HITCHHIKING: STRAIN, CONTROL, AND SUBCULTURAL APPROACHES

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Sociological explanations of why individuals engage in deviant behavior are of predominately three forms: strain or motivational theories, control theories, and subcultural theories (Hirschi, 1971). Motivational theories, such as Merton's (1962) well known anomie theory, focus on factors which motivate an individual to engage in deviant behavior. Control theories center on factors which maintain an individual's conforming behaviors (cf. Reiss, 1951). Subcultural theories, such as Sutherland's theory of differential association, suggest that deviant individuals are conforming to non-conventional group norms (Sutherland and Cressey, 1966). While these theories have been largely applied to juvenile delinquency and adult crime, their broad arguments can usefully structure sociological investigations of a wide range of deviant and quasi-deviant behaviors.

In the study of female hitchhiking reported here, these three broad approaches served to locate possible explanatory factors and guide the analysis. In the eyes of many U.S. citizens, hitchhiking by females is viewed as a morally questionable behavior which may serve to impugn the reputation of the hitchhiker. Beyond these informal views about the impropriety of female hitchhiking are various laws and practices designed to curb hitchhiking. For example, laws prohibiting or regulating hitchhiking exist in some areas, and practices persist such as insurance company rules limiting coverage of persons who assist hitchhikers. Thus in both a moral and legal sense female hitchhiking and especially women hitchhiking alone can be heuristically and usefully conceptualized as quasi-deviant behavior.

Despite popular reports of the increase of hitchhiking in the United States, the authors could not find any professional literature attempting either to describe or explain solo or group female hitchhiking. In at least two states known to the authors, law enforcement officers have investigated hitchhiking in an effort to understand and curb it. In one Mid-western city with a substantial and rising rape rate, female hitchhiking has been actively discouraged by the police because a sizable minority of known rape victims are females hitchhiking alone. Yet despite this recent

interest in and the practical ramifications of female hitchhiking, no previous empirical research exists concerning the characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes of women who hitchhike. The research reported here is a beginning to an understanding of this increasingly common behavior.

Method

A questionnaire was mailed to every ninth female from the alphabetized registration list of the 1971 Summer Session of the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin (only foreign students were excluded). The questionnaire included forced choice response questions as well as open-ended questions concerning motives and personal hitchhiking experiences. A total of 428 questionnaires (82% of the original sample) were returned and were usable. From questionnaires and letters returned, it is estimated that between 15 and 20 percent of the non-respondents never received the questionnaire due to change in local address or their having left the city. Non-respondents did not significantly differ from respondents on age, year in school, or area of academic concentration.

University students are thought popularly to hitchhike more than other groups. Thus, sampling from this population increased the likelihood that a large number of female hitchhikers could be located. Also students were thought to be introspective and articulate hopefully facilitating the gathering of information on feelings and motives.

In addition to the mailed questionnaires, informal interviews were conducted with a small sample of females while they hitchhiked. The interview data strongly supports the questionnaire data and gives us more confidence in our conclusions.

Four classifications of hitchhiking behaviors are used in the analysis: (1) never hitchhiked, (2) hitchhike, but only with others, (3) hitchhike alone "infrequently", and (4) hitchhike alone "frequently". Those classified as infrequently hitchhiking alone responded "rarely" or "sometimes" to the question, "Do you hitchhike alone?" while those designated as frequently hitchhiking alone responded "frequently" or "almost always" to this question. Of the total sample, 134 (33%) had never hitchhiked, 112 (28%) hitchhiked but only with others, 120 (30%) hitchhiked infrequently alone, and 37 (9%) hitchhiked frequently alone (25 respondents were unclassifiable due to lack of information).

Unless otherwise given, the percentages in the following data are based on these frequencies in each hitchhiking category.

This general classification of the frequency of hitchhiking alone is positively and significantly associated with the frequency of hitchhiking alone in the last two weeks ($\gamma = .89$, $N = 145$, $p < .001$) and with the frequency of hitchhiking alone through the hitchhiker's life ($\gamma = .91$, $N = 146$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the frequency of hitchhiking alone in the last two weeks is positively and significantly associated with the frequency of ever hitchhiking alone ($\gamma = .80$, $N = 185$, $p < .001$). Therefore, this basic distinction between frequent and infrequent solo hitchhiking is felt to adequately incorporate variations in both recency and frequency of hitchhiking alone.

TABLE 1
INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AND HITCHHIKING BEHAVIORS

Individual Characteristics	Type of Hitchhiker				x ²	df	p <
	Never Hitchhiked	Hitchhike Only With Others	Hitchhike Infrequently Alone	Hitchhike Frequently Alone			
Age (% under 23 years old)	29	64	68	81	59.68	3	.001
Class (% undergraduate)	33	66	68	78	49.14	3	.001
Major Field of Study (% in Social Sciences, Humanities or Fine Arts)	36	48	53	62	11.54	2	.01
Religiosity (% Never active)	28	30	38	67	19.65	3	.001
Religion (% Jewish or non-affiliated)	25	46	48	70	37.83	3	.001
N =	134	112	120	37			

Results

The female students with these various hitchhiking histories differ significantly on several social characteristics and present behaviors. As Table 1 shows, women who hitchhike alone are significantly younger,

more often undergraduates, and more often studying in the social sciences, humanities or fine arts. They are significantly less likely to be religiously active, and their religious backgrounds are more likely to be Jewish or non-affiliated. Their family backgrounds tend to be slightly higher in status, based on their fathers' occupations and educations (for example, only 37 percent of the fathers of non-hitchhikers had completed college compared to 75 percent of the fathers of those who hitchhiked frequently alone). Those who hitchhike frequently alone are no more likely to come from urban areas or from a particular region of the country. Explanations for these relationships are suggested later.

The Strain or Motivational Approach. An explanation of female hitchhiking which parallels Merton's (1962:139-149) classic strain theory explanation of crime would basically consist of the following argument: some women may have socially acceptable goals, such as transportation to certain points, which they cannot meet through the legitimate means available to them, and thus these women employ less socially desirable means to these goals, such as hitchhiking with others or even alone. Clearly, the desire for and need of transportation are the most obvious legitimate motivations to hitchhike. Thus both legitimate desires for and lack of alternate transportation were examined as explanations of hitchhiking behaviors.

While 62 percent of frequent solo hitchhikers give "free ride" or its equivalent as a reason for hitchhiking, only 35 percent of infrequent solo hitchhikers and 23 percent of those who hitchhike only with others give this type of reason ($x^2 = 19.75$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). Those who hitchhike more often alone are also significantly more likely to give a form of "convenience of travel" as a reason ($x^2 = 10.67$, $df = 2$, $p < .005$). Thus legitimate transportation motives are much more common among solo and frequent female hitchhikers.

Turning to the question of lack of legitimate means, those hitchhiking more often alone are significantly less likely to report having an automobile or other adequate transportation available ($x^2 = 54.56$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). The percent of each hitchhiking group reporting access to an automobile or other adequate transportation is 95 percent for non-hitchhikers, 66 percent for those hitchhiking only with others, 60 percent for those hitchhiking infrequently alone, and 54 percent for those hitchhiking frequently alone. As might be expected, most non-hitchhikers (63 percent) report one reason they do not hitchhike is because they have other available transportation. Yet, because from one-

half to two-thirds of those who hitchhike report having an automobile or other adequate transportation, clearly only a minority of the difference in hitchhiking behavior may be explained by availability of transportation.

The Control Theory Approach. Central to control theory is the notion that a “person invests time, energy, himself, in a certain line of activity — say, getting an education (or) acquiring a reputation for virtue . . . (and thus) must consider the costs of deviant behavior . . . (Hirshi, 1971:20). As the costs of hitchhiking are most clearly found in the dangers of hitchhiking, e.g., rape, robbery, or harrassment, perceptions of hitchhiking danger were examined.

The percentage of women who report hitchhiking alone to involve a “great deal” of danger is as follows: 60 percent (N = 134) of those never hitchhiking, 57 percent (N = 107) of those hitchhiking only with others, 28 percent (N = 119) of those hitchhiking infrequently alone, and 3 percent (N = 37) of those hitchhiking frequently alone (difference significant with $\chi^2 = 61.60$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). Seventy-five percent of the non-hitchhikers say that danger is “the major reason” they do not hitchhike. Clearly, as the control theory approach suggests, a lack of a perception of the costs in terms of danger is associated with more frequent and solo hitchhiking.

Yet a control theory approach specifies additionally that an absence of perceived costs is the “cause” and not merely the “result” of deviant behaviors. Thus our data were examined to see if differential perceptions of hitchhiking’s dangerousness were really a result of hitchhiking experiences. If they were, then the association of these perceptions of dangerousness and hitchhiking behaviors would not actually be supportive of a control theory explanation. Three ways in which hitchhiking experiences might lead to perceptions of hitchhiking’s dangerousness or non-dangerousness were investigated.

First, hitchhikers in order to continue hitchhiking, for whatever reason, may deny or rationalize away the danger and continue hitchhiking. This possibility was investigated through an examination of answers to open-ended questions concerning the respondent’s motives, feelings of danger, and reactions to hitchhiking experiences. In general, the respondents gave no indications that they were denying or distorting the possibility of real danger. Neither did they often present rationalizations or engage in other maneuvers designed to displace the potential dangerous consequences from themselves. Many hitchhikers

made statements such as: “We must be realistic — a risk is involved but it is overlooked because most drivers are OK”, “You never know what kind of a nut you’re getting into the car with. Driving a car or walking can be dangerous too but we still do it”, or “One must weigh the possible costs of hitchhiking against the benefits it supplies”. The hitchhikers were with very few exceptions able to discuss the danger involved and to relate realistically their experiences without avoiding the problem. While this data is not as extensive or detailed as we would have liked, we feel that it would have revealed any consistent pattern of denial or rationalization.

Second, hitchhikers may hear of other’s difficulties or encounter trouble themselves while hitchhiking, conclude that hitchhiking is dangerous, and cease hitchhiking. Yet the data suggest that knowledge or experience of hitchhiking problems does not lead to a cessation of hitchhiking. Over 87 percent of the hitchhikers in each hitchhiking category had heard of someone having been either sexually assaulted, robbed, or in automobile accident while hitchhiking. Seven percent of the hitchhikers even reported having had one of these “unfortunate upsetting incidents” happen to them while hitchhiking. Another 26 percent had been sexually approached (but not actually physically touched), harrassed, or arrested. Yet defining those who ceased hitchhiking as those who had hitchhiked several times a month or more at any time in the past but who reported not having hitchhiked during the previous two weeks, no respondent could be defined as having stopped hitchhiking. Thus even those who experienced unfortunate incidences continued to hitchhike. The data also suggest that perceptions of hitchhiking as dangerous do not result from hearing of unfortunate incidences or experiencing difficulties while hitchhiking. The experience of even the more serious hitchhiking incidents, e.g., being robbed, sexually molested, or in an automobile accident, is not associated with feelings that hitchhiking is dangerous. Also, knowledge of unfortunate hitchhiking incidents happening to others is essentially unrelated to how dangerous solo hitchhiking is perceived by the respondents. In summary, unfortunate hitchhiking experiences probably do not lead to feelings that hitchhiking is dangerous or to a cessation of hitchhiking.

Third, hitchhikers may experience little difficulty while hitchhiking, conclude that hitchhiking is not dangerous or that they can handle situations which occur, and continue hitchhiking. One possibility is that the more a woman student hitchhikes with others or hitchhikes alone the

more she may feel that she can handle the potentially dangerous situations she encounters. A number of respondents clearly stated the real possibility of serious situations occurring while they were hitchhiking but added that they felt they had enough experience to handle most of these situations. They stated, for instance: "A fair amount of cautiousness is reasonable when hitchhiking; I do not feel it to be dangerous when done with caution", "It is dangerous with perverts, horny old men, even horny young men. Also hassles with cops. I still hitchhike because I'm selective of who I ride with; my standards have proven reliable", "The situation always has a potential for danger, but, in most instances, I feel I can handle it", and "I've been made wiser — now I'm able to protect myself and react in protective and self-assuring ways". Often the hitchhikers questioned would respond to questions concerning danger by recounting a personal experience and how they had handled it successfully or unsuccessfully. These responses indicated that the students felt their experience enabled them to master, though not eliminate, the danger involved. In addition to feelings of mastery, the solo or group hitchhiker may perceive less danger because her experience leads her to believe that the risk is in fact rather slight. Many made statements like these: "I've hitchhiked much and never had a bad time", "I feel persons who pick up kids are OK. Weird things happen rarely — the ratio is good for safe hitchhiking", "I realize what *can* happen, but nothing has. I've had good experiences", "I don't consider it that dangerous — my previous experience is positive", "It is quite rare anything bad physically happens to you, if anything only verbally", and "My good experiences are tempered by the stories I've heard warning hitchhikers against rape and brutality. My experiences have been very positive". Even many women who had experienced unfortunate incidences made such statements.

Another possibility is, as the data show, that the probability of a serious incident occurring is actually small and that this leads hitchhikers to see hitchhiking as not being dangerous. No respondent reported ever having been raped, attacked with a weapon, or kidnapped. Only six percent of all the hitchhikers reported having been sexually approached to the point of being touched. Less than one percent reported having been robbed. Only three percent had ever been in a car accident while hitchhiking. The more common incidences were relatively less serious (9 percent had been arrested, 14 percent reported harrassment, 6 percent had been sexually approached but not touched).

Finally, only seven percent of all hitchhikers reported experiencing more than one unfortunate experience of any kind and less than one percent reported experiencing more than one "serious" incident. While these experiences are unquestionably real and serious for those involved, clearly the vast majority of female hitchhikers have not experienced even one of them. Perhaps hitchhiking teaches most hitchhikers that hitchhiking is not all that dangerous. To the extent that a perception of hitchhiking as not dangerous is due either to feelings of mastery or to realistic perceptions, and thus that these perceptions are the result of hitchhiking experiences and not the cause of them, then the control theory approach must be discounted.

Subcultural Approaches. Under subcultural approaches, deviant behavior is seen as behavior conforming to the non-conventional attitudes and behaviors of the subgroup with which one associates. Thus we explored whether the friends of female hitchhikers also hitchhiked and whether they encouraged the respondent's hitchhiking behaviors.

The more friends (male or female) a respondent has who hitchhike, the

TABLE 2
FRIENDS' HITCHHIKING BEHAVIORS AND TYPE OF HITCHHIKER

Friends' Hitchhiking Behavior	Type of Hitchhiking Behavior				x ²	df	p <
	Never Hitchhiked	Hitchhike Only With Others	Hitchhike Infrequently Alone	Hitchhike Frequently Alone			
Percent having five or more friends who hitchhike	30	59	73	97	54.20	3	.001
Percent having "many" close friends who hitchhike	10	29	46	78	81.63	3	.001
Percent whose close friends encourage them to hitchhike	3	12	17	22	17.03	3	.001
N =	134	112	120	37			

more likely the respondent is to hitchhike and to hitchhike alone (see Table 2). Similarly, the more a respondent reports that her friends encourage her to hitchhike, the more likely she is to hitchhike and to hitchhike alone.

Some women may hitchhike in direct response to peer group pressure, as several indicated: "Hitchhiking is expected of me by companions", "Sometimes I hitchhike to go along with others — would prefer to walk myself", or I hitchhike "because of peer group pressure". One respondent reported "peer coolness" if she appeared apprehensive about hitchhiking.

TABLE 3
CORRELATIONS OF MAJOR STUDY VARIABLES
WITH RESPONDENT'S HITCHHIKING BEHAVIOR
CONTROLLING FOR OTHER STUDY VARIABLES (N = 304)

	Control Variables			
	No Control	1. Friends Hitchhiking	2. Dangerousness	3. Alternate Transportation
1. Number of close friends who hitchhike	.51 ***	a	.45 ***	.45 ***
2. Perceived dangerousness of hitchhiking alone	.36 ***	.25 ***	a	.36 ***
3. Adequacy of alternate transportation	.34 ***	.22 ***	.34 ***	a
4. Age	-.29 ***	-.17 **	-.31 ***	-.23 ***
5. Class (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Graduate Student)	-.15 **	.00	-.15 **	-.09
6. Area of Study (other areas vs. Social Sciences, Humanities, and Fine Arts)	-.13 *	-.05	-.11 *	-.11 *
7. Religion (Jewish and non-affiliated vs. Catholic and Protestant)	-.31 ***	-.18 ***	-.27 ***	-.30 ***

a Inapplicable
 *** $p < .001$
 ** $p < .01$
 * $p < .05$

These findings directly and strongly support the subcultural explanation for hitchhiking behaviors.

Comparing Approaches. The zero order correlations in Table 3 show that the hitchhiking behaviors of the respondent's friends are correlated with her own hitchhiking behaviors more highly than the respondent's hitchhiking behaviors are correlated with any other study variable. This indicator of the importance of subcultural influences remains prominently correlated with the respondent's hitchhiking behavior even when the six other major independent variables in this study are controlled singularly, as shown in Table 3, or in concert. Conversely, the correlations between all the other study variables and the respondent's hitchhiking behaviors are substantially reduced, if not eliminated, by controlling for the number of the respondent's close friends who hitchhike. These partial correlations more strikingly show the important influence that friends' behaviors may have on female hitchhiking.

Even after friends' hitchhiking behaviors have been controlled, other study variables retain some explanatory importance. First, perceived dangerousness of hitchhiking alone remains significantly correlated with the respondent's hitchhiking. Yet as was noted above, it may be that variations in perceived dangerousness are a result and not a cause of hitchhiking behaviors. Second, the availability of alternate transportation similarly remains significantly correlated with hitchhiking behaviors when other variables are controlled, indicating the probable continued though secondary importance of these legitimate motivations in bringing women to hitchhike.

Finally of the individual characteristics examined, only age and religion remain significantly correlated with hitchhiking behaviors after controlling for close friends' hitchhiking behaviors, and these correlations are substantially reduced. This may be because not only are most respondents like their close friends in hitchhiking behavior, they are also, as we would expect, more often like their close friends in age, class, area of study, and religion. Furthermore, as Table 4 suggests, these individual characteristics show some positive interrelationships and are in general more strongly associated with close friends' hitchhiking behaviors than they are to either perceived dangerousness or lack of alternative transportation. These individual characteristics may thus be associated in either a causal or consequent manner with those campus subcultural groupings in which female hitchhiking is more common.

TABLE 4
CORRELATION MATRIX OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Number of close friends who hitchhike	.31 ***	.31 ***	-.30 ***	-.29 ***	-.17 **	-.32 ***
2. Perceived dangerousness of hitchhiking		.02	.00	-.01	-.09	-.17 **
3. Adequacy of alternative transportation			-.24 ***	-.19 ***	-.09	-.09
4. Age				.60 ***	.02	.13 *
5. Class					.00	.03
6. Area of study						.13 *
7. Religion						

*** Significant at $p < .001$

** Significant at $p < .01$

* Significant at $p < .05$

Discussion

This study of female hitchhiking was guided by three prominent approaches in deviance theory. The first, strain or motivational theories, suggests that women may hitchhike because of lack of other adequate transportation. This approach was only partially substantiated; less than one-half of those who frequently hitchhiked alone reported a lack of adequate transportation. A student who is concerned with transportation can choose to live where bus and foot transportation is sufficient. The general availability of transportation for those who are concerned about it and plan for it may result in transportation being only of secondary importance in explaining hitchhiking behaviors.

The second approach, control theory, was examined by investigating how the perceived or admitted risks involved in hitchhiking related to hitchhiking behaviors. As expected, students who more often hitchhike with others or alone report that they think it is less dangerous. Several alternative explanations for this relationship were then evaluated and plausible explanations were found which did not support a control

theory explanation. Specifically, perceptions of hitchhiking as not dangerous appeared to be a result of hitchhiking behaviors contrary to what control theory predicts. There was a feeling on the part of many female hitchhikers that they had learned to manage most potentially unfortunate situations. There was little evidence of gross over-evaluation of competency; rather these women hitchhikers appeared to sense that they had gained some mastery over the situation. Also to a great extent the respondents' perceptions of hitchhiking as not dangerous appeared to be a realistic product of their generally positive experiences and not a distorted image in support of continued hitchhiking.

The failure of this examination of perceived dangerousness to support a control theory explanation may have several roots. Changing female attitudes and sex role behaviors may cause a solo woman hitchhiker to have little fear of a potential sexual threat or assault. The question of moral reprehensibility may be becoming less of a question, and the threat of sexual assault may not be as great as it once was, both because of changing sexual ethics and because of the resurgence of feelings of confidence, pride, aggressivity and mastery over their fate that many young women feel today. As one respondent noted, "Females especially are brainwashed to think 'people are out to get you'. Students may completely reject this idea". The threat of sexual assault may well be basically a political one and has been used for centuries to deny women certain freedoms (see Millet, 1971). Younger "liberated" co-eds may see themselves as having the same prerogatives as a man, i.e., the right to take a walk at night, to thumb a ride, to have freedom of access and movement at any time and in any place. Many younger women may reject former notions of the costs of sexual assault and they may accordingly decide to engage in similar travel patterns as men. Thus, they learn to handle the risks through mastery and intelligence in the same manner that men have.

The data strongly suggest that female hitchhiking may be a peer group phenomenon, as the subcultural approach would suggest. Female hitchhikers have friends who hitchhike and friends who encourage them to hitchhike. These hitchhikers and presumably their friends are more often young, Jewish or non-religiously affiliated, and studying in the social sciences, humanities, and fine arts. These are characteristics common among the more activist and counter-culture students, both male and female (Watts, Lynch and Whittaker, 1969). There may be several reasons why hitchhiking alone may be a valued behavior in the

student counter-culture or its subgroups. Hitchhiking may imply a sense of trust between the motorist and hitchhiker. It may be seen as an active demonstration of the need and utility of cooperation and the sharing of possessions. Hitchhiking is furthermore a demonstration by the hitchhiker of his freedom from those time schedules and obligations which "run" so many lives. The values of the student counter-culture may thus support and even generate hitchhiking.

Around most behaviors which are supported by group values grows a lore about techniques of performing the behavior. This lore develops through experience and is passed on to newer members of the group. For example, in the course of this research, the authors attended a student led "seminar" which dealt exclusively with hitchhiking techniques, including tips on how to enhance safety. A female hitchhiker probably draws informally on the experience of her hitchhiking friends for tips on how to avoid potentially troublesome situations or how to deal with such situations when they occur. The fact that her friends hitchhike may make it easier for her to gain a sense of her mastery over hitchhiking problems and anxieties.

Furthermore, the fact that one's friends hitchhike and encourage hitchhiking makes it difficult for one not to hitchhike. A woman may choose to hitchhike in the face of recognizable danger if this is a means to gain or keep associations she values.

Finally, just as hitchhikers are clustered in groups which value hitchhiking, non-hitchhikers are probably clustered in groups whose values condemn hitchhiking. Non-hitchhikers may reinforce each others' negative views of hitchhiking. They may thus come to over-emphasize dangers involved in hitchhiking alone and consequently misassess the motives in female hitchhikers. In fact, the misconceptions and misperceptions of non-hitchhikers may be greater than those of female hitchhikers because of the non-hitchhikers' relative ignorance of the real motives and real experiences of women who hitchhike alone.

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