



When the social discourse on violation behaviours is challenged by the perception of everyday life experiences: Effects of non-accident experiences on offending attitudes and habits



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to introduce the concept of the Non-Accident Experience (NAE) with regard to violations of traffic safety regulations. An NAE refers to the fact of not having been involved in an accident following the adoption of a behaviour socially recognised as promoting its occurrence. We hypothesise that this type of experiences has a strong effect on attitudes (valence and strength) and habits with regard to traffic offences such as speeding and drink-drive. An empirical study was conducted to measure all these theoretical constructs. As expected, the results showed that the more frequently NAEs were experienced the more individuals had a favourable and weak (less certain, less important, more ambivalent) attitude towards violations, as well as strong habits. In addition, the more numerous NAEs experienced by others were perceived to be, the more ambivalent was the attitude. The discussion firstly concerns the methodological limitations of this study (e.g. use of cross-sectional design) as well as the integration of this concept into current research, especially in relation to the attitude strength concept and the theory of planned behaviour. Then, we discuss its practical implications (use of the experience based analysis technique, with consideration of both accident and non-accident experiences).

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1. Introduction

Several approaches have been developed which seek to explain the origin of violations of traffic safety regulations. Amongst these, studies referring to the concept of attitude have been numerous (e.g. Chorlton et al., 2012; Elliott et al., 2013; Lawton et al., 2009; Letirand and Delhomme, 2005; Lheureux, 2012; Palat and Delhomme, 2012). Several studies have also referred to the concepts of script and habit (e.g. Bayer and Campbell, 2012; de Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007; Horvath et al., 2012; Lheureux et al., 2016; Mittal, 1988; Norris and Myers, 2013). In fact, numerous interventions have been implemented to counteract the formation of attitudes and habits conducive to the violation road safety regulations (e.g. training, police control, fines, prevention campaigns). Although these achieve their aim (Elvik et al., 2009),

the difficulties encountered in changing individual behaviours remain considerable. We think that these difficulties arise, in the main, from the failure to take into account explicitly and systematically one factor whose role is crucial: experiences of non-accident which contradict safety recommendations and regulations.

1.1. Non-Accident Experiences (NAEs)

In the field of safety, the organising principle of risk prevention measures is that the failure to take account of safety regulations leads to an accident or failing that to a punishment from the state or the organisation. *The dominant social discourse*, conveyed by decision-makers and actors in the field of safety – and widely relayed by various media – associates the non-observance of regulations with accidents and their observance with safety. This discourse represents the norm, legitimised by the law and the technical standards and regulations aimed at its application. And so, each individual is encouraged to take a position with regard to this social discourse and it is expected that the individual will conform to it, ideally by subscribing to it or (prevention), failing that, by constraint (repression).

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This social discourse is supported by empirical data establishing a statistical link between the violation of regulations and involvement in an accident. More precisely, *this link is based on an estimation of relative risk*: the probability of having an accident following the performance a given behaviour compared to when not performing it. *However it does not in any way imply that the absolute probability of having an accident is high.* [Barbone and al's study](#) see also [Valent et al., 2002](#)) well illustrates this phenomenon. Based on a sample of 410,306 individuals, the researchers' aim was to estimate whether the risk of being involved in a traffic accident was higher after having consumed a psychoactive substance. With regard to benzodiazepines, they obtained an odds ratio of 1.62 effectively confirming an increased exposure to the risk of accident after consuming this type of substance. Over the entire sample, monitored for almost 3 years, 19,386 drivers were involved in road-traffic accidents (i.e. "only" 4.72% of the total sample). Out of these drivers, only 235 of the 40,402 individuals identified as consumers of this type of substance drove after having consumed benzodiazepine (or 0.58%). Thus, *even when a behaviour recognised as increasing the probability of an accident was adopted, the absolute risk remained low.* Consequently, for the individual, experiencing non-occurrence of accident situations is more highly probable than that of being involved in an accident.

So decision-makers and "experts" are focused on the event to be avoided (accident) and seek to identify the factors associated with it with a view to reducing its occurrence in a given population (macrosocial approach) and over a relatively long period of time. In this respect, evaluating the relative risk associated with a violation provides useful information for the introduction of regulatory systems and the evaluation of their effectiveness at regular intervals. However, we think that the individual approaches things from a different perspective, acting by being focused on the achievement of goals (and not on the possible accident), in a reduced social context (microsocial approach) and with a restricted temporality (short term focus). While it was through considering a large sample of individuals monitored over a long period of time that the link between non-observance of regulations and accidents was proved from a statistical point of view for the expert, this link only becomes perceptible for the individual through their everyday experience. Yet, the absolute risk of being involved in an accident following a violation is low and, consequently, *the individual experiences non-accident situations on an essentially everyday basis, even when they adopt a behaviour thought to promote accidents.*

Although constituting the main part of individual experiences, no study to our knowledge has explicitly analysed the influence of these "non-accidents" on the attitudes, habits and behaviours of individuals. However several of them have put forward arguments in favour of taking them into account. For example, [Forward's qualitative study \(2006\)](#) revealed that car drivers breaking driving regulations justify their actions by declaring their superiority in their driving skills and experience, but also by the fact that they have never been in an accident despite their numerous infringements. This reasoning may be explained, in line with [Svenson \(1978\)](#), by the availability heuristic ([Tversky and Kahneman, 1973](#)), according to which the lack of past exposure to road accidents leads the individual to perceive driving as safer than it is, as the number of accidents which they can remember is then very low in comparison with the number of times they have driven in the past. So, [Weinstein \(1987\)](#) observed that individuals have a tendency to underestimate their exposure to different risks when this has never occurred in the past. Thus, these studies and the reasoning expounded previously suggest that a particular experience has to be taken into account: Non-Accident Experiences (NAEs) which refer to the fact of not having been involved in an accident following

the adoption of a behaviour socially recognised as promoting its occurrence.

1.2. Effects of NAEs on attitudes and habits with regard to the violation of regulations

NAEs probably have an impact on violation-related attitudes and habits. Recent theoretical conceptualisations and empirical studies (e.g. [Conner et al., 2013](#); [Elliott et al., 2013](#); [Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010](#); [Lawton et al., 2009](#); [Lawton et al., 2007](#)) consider that evaluations, more or less favourable/unfavourable, of the performance of a behaviour (attitude towards the behaviour) originate from a collection of beliefs and affects. The beliefs mainly concern the potential consequences of the behaviour, with individuals evaluating simultaneously their valence (positive or negative) and the likelihood of their occurrence. With regard to "risky" behaviours, accident is the main potential negative consequence and, as such, the more an individual is persuaded that the behaviour (the violation of a regulation) makes the accident more likely, the more negative is the attitude to it and the more they will observe the regulations. This relationship between violations and accidents is the governing principle behind preventive measures and recommendations/injunctions to comply with safety procedures and regulations.

However, *the more an individual has experienced and considers themselves to have experienced NAEs in the past, the more they will tend to consider this dominant social discourse as counter-factual or exaggerated.* In so doing, the more frequent are NAEs, the more they will lead an individual to relativise the link between violations and accidents. In other words, accidents would then be seen as a possible though very unlikely consequence of a violation of the regulations. This point of view is all the more plausible as having experiences directly in connection with the attitude object has been identified as strongly influencing the formation of attitudes as well as subsequent behaviours (e.g. [Duerden and Witt, 2010](#); [Fazio et al., 1978](#); [Fazio and Zanna, 1981](#); [Millar and Millar, 1996](#)) Considered together, these elements suggest the following hypothesis (H1): *the more numerous NAEs individuals have experienced and consider themselves to have experienced, the less negative is their attitude towards the violation of the regulation concerned.*

Valence (positive/negative) is not the only characteristic of an attitude. Many studies with the aim of understanding why the attitude-behaviour relationship fluctuates have revealed that attitudes have another property: their "strength" ([Petty and Krosnick, 1995](#)). The main idea is that attitudes do not have all the same qualities: some are said to be "strong" as they exert a strong influence on cognition and action and are crystallised, whereas others are said to be "weak" as they present inverse characteristics. Several factors have been identified as determining their strength ([Krosnick et al., 1993](#); [Petty and Krosnick, 1995](#); [Raden, 1985](#); [Visser et al., 2006](#)). Amongst them, ambivalence, certainty and importance have been particularly studied and identified as inter-linked.

Attitudinal ambivalence refers to the fact of having a simultaneously positive and negative attitude to the object. An attitude becomes ambivalent when the behaviour is perceived as favouring positive and negative consequences equally and is associated with both negative and positive affects. Ambivalence reduces consistency between attitude – as quantified overall by means of a questionnaire (i.e. mean attitude score) – and behaviour measured at a given moment ([Conner and Sparks, 2002](#); [Cooke and Sheeran, 2004](#); [Thompson et al., 1995](#)). As described previously, the situation in which an individual who has had numerous NAEs finds themselves is conducive to attitudinal ambivalence. In this case, the individual finds themselves jointly faced with contradictory experiences, with on one side, what [Fazio and Zanna \(1981\)](#) and others ([Duerden and Witt, 2010](#); [Millar and Millar, 1996](#)) referred

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