



Life satisfaction, well-being and safe driving behaviour in undergraduate psychology students



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 September 2015

Received in revised form 9 September 2016

Accepted 12 April 2017

Available online 12 May 2017

Keywords:

Life satisfaction

Well-being

Traffic violations

Safe driving behaviour

ABSTRACT

This study used measures of three self-reported orientations to happiness (engagement, meaning, and pleasure), to examine whether any of the them related to the number of self-reported unwanted driving incidences (crashes, near misses and traffic fines). One hundred and sixty undergraduate Psychology students on a valid New Zealand driver licence were required to fill in the 'Good Life' questionnaire and complete a demographics questionnaire in regard to their age, gender, driving experience and number of unwanted incidences in the previous 12 months. The results showed that the happiness orientations of meaning and engagement correlated negatively and strongly with the number of incidences the drivers experienced in the previous year. The dimension of pleasure, however, indicated a positive correlation, revealing that the higher the participants rated on that dimension, the more likely they had unwanted driving incidences. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis indicated first that mileage, gender and age groups accounted for a significant 30% of the variance in the number of unwanted incidences – on step 2, the variable 'meaning' (having revealed the strongest correlation with the number of incidences) was added to the regression equation and accounted for an additional and significant 21% of the variance in the number of incidences. Finally, on step 3, the variable 'intention to commit traffic violations' accounted for a further 13% of the incidences. The results indicate that high levels of happiness relating to life satisfaction and well-being, facilitate pro-social and adaptive behaviour and seem to safeguard drivers against committing deliberate traffic violations that would put them at serious risk.

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1. Introduction

There is a long history of research examining the link between personality factors of drivers and their crash risk. For example, [Beirness \(1993\)](#) found from an extensive body of research that thrill seeking, impulsiveness, hostility/aggression, emotional instability, depression, and locus of control account for as much as 10–20% of the variance in crash involvement and up to 35% of the variance in measures of risky driving behaviour. Since then, much research has focused on further variables predicting risky driving, including age ([McKnight & McKnight, 2003](#)), gender ([Bergdahl, 2005](#)), driving experience ([Mayhew, Simpson, & Pak \(2003\)](#)), frontal lobes brain development ([Isler, Starkey, Drew, & Sheppard, 2008](#); [Pharo, Sim, Graham, Gross, & Hayne, 2011](#)), overestimation of own skills (e.g., [Kuiken & Twisk, 2001](#)), and intention to commit driving violations ([Parker, Manstead, Stradling, & Reason, 1992](#)). On the other hand, the question of how pro-social behaviour and

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positive appraisals of subjective life-satisfaction could possibly safeguard against risky driving behaviour, has received only little attention from researchers (Harris et al., 2014).

1.1. Pro-social behaviour and driving outcomes

Pro-social behaviour is defined as a “broad range of actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself, such as: helping, comforting, sharing, cooperation, philanthropy, and community service” (Batson, 2012, cited in Harris et al., 2014, p.2). Similarly, safe driving practises have been conceptualised as behaving in a pro-social way, whereby one attempts to “protect the well-being of passengers, other drivers, and pedestrians, and promote effective cooperation with others in the driving environment” (Harris et al., 2014, p.2). Pro-social driving behaviour has been negatively correlated with driving errors and violations (Ozkan & Lajunen, 2005) and is a significant component involved in positive driving outcomes (Harris et al., 2014). Not only do high levels of life satisfaction mediate positive, proactive and pro-social behaviours, they also reduce behaviours that may be harmful to one's health or safety (Zullig, Valois, Huebner, Oeltmann, & Drane, 2001). From this, it can be assumed that behaviours associated with high levels of life satisfaction will carry over into the driving context and promote positive driving outcomes, as the act of driving largely exists in a social context and is considered to be an extension of one's lifestyle (Gregersen & Berg, 1994; Latimer & Munro, 2006). These behaviours also relate to the goals for life, at the top (most important) level of the hierarchical GDE (goals for driver education) matrix (Hatakka, Keskinen, Gregersen, Glad, & Hernetkoski, 2002).

1.2. Safe driving style

A patient and careful driving style was conceptualised by Taubman-Ben-Ari, Mikulincer, and Gillath (2004), as being premised on pro-social behaviour. This driving style includes components such as calm and courteous driving behaviour, obeying traffic regulations, planning ahead, and paying attention to the road. A large sample of men (150) and women (170) were examined across an integrated range of socio-demographic, personality, and motivational factors in order to identify antecedents of the patient and careful driving style. This driving style was subsequently found to reduce displays of reckless driving behaviour and hostility on the road, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive driving outcomes (Taubman-Ben-Ari et al., 2004).

1.3. Negative driving outcomes

Previous studies have negatively correlated low levels of life satisfaction with symptoms of anxiety, depression, neuroticism, and loneliness (Bulmash, Moller, Kayumov, Shen, Wang, & Shapiro, 2006; Ash & Huebner, 2001; Huebner, 1991; Liu & Guo, 2008; McKnight, Huebner, & Suldo, 2002) and have related these symptoms of psychological distress to negative driving outcomes (Verschuur & Hurts, 2008) such as accident involvement. Verschuur and Hurts (2008) carried out a study of 743 Dutch drivers who completed ‘the Driver Behaviour Questionnaire’ (DBQ) in order to measure unsafe driving practises, including driving violation frequency and accident involvement throughout the preceding year. Accident involvement was found to be predicted by negative psychological precursors such as symptoms of distress (Verschuur & Hurts, 2008). Further, Hilton, Staddon, Sheridan, and Whiteford (2009) found across an Australian survey of 1324 drivers, that those who reported high levels of depression as measured by the Depression, Anxiety and Stress scale (DASS) experienced more frequent involvement in vehicle accidents and near-misses throughout a 28-day period than did drivers who reported no symptoms of depression. If low levels of life satisfaction and well-being can be associated with negative driving outcomes, then research is needed to examine the role high levels of life satisfaction and well-being in possibly safeguarding drivers against unsafe driving practices.

1.4. Life satisfaction, well-being and driving

Life satisfaction is a “summary appraisal of the quality of one's life regardless of how it is achieved” (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005, p. 39), and is the cognitive component of subjective well-being (Park, 2004). Peterson et al. (2005) created the ‘Good Life’ Questionnaire which identified three orientation factors for achieving life satisfaction. These three distinguishable orientations include ‘pleasure’ (related to hedonism), ‘meaning’ (related to eudemonia) and ‘engagement’ (related to flow-experiences).

The orientation of engagement is said to be a viable avenue towards achieving life satisfaction when endorsed on its own. It is conceptualised as experiencing high levels of engagement during any given activity, thereby facilitating a state of flow (Peterson et al., 2005). Flow is said to be a non-conscious experience whereby time passes quickly, attention is focused, and the sense of self is lost; feelings of joy and satisfaction are said to be felt once the state of flow resides (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Those who score high in the orientation of engagement have been found to have a positive personality disposition, including low neuroticism, high extroversion and high agreeableness (Hirschi, 2011).

Features of agreeableness include altruism, trust, kindness, sensitivity, tolerance, and conformity to social norms (Digman, 1990). The orientation of engagement is further associated with qualities such as perseverance (Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007), commitment and achievement (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) and can also be associated with

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