



A qualitative exploration of driving stress and driving discourtesy

B. Scott-Parker^{a,b,c,*}, C.M. Jones^d, K. Rune^{a,b,c}, J. Tucker^e



^a Adolescent Risk Research Unit (ARRU), Sunshine Coast Mind and Neuroscience – Thompson Institute, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

^b School of Social Science, Faculty of Arts, Business, and Law, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

^c Sustainability Research Centre, Faculty of Arts and Business, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

^d Faculty of Arts and Business, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

^e The Royal Automobile Club of Queensland, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Driving courtesy, and conversely driving discourtesy, recently has been of great interest in the public domain. In addition, there has been increasing recognition of the negative impact of stress upon the individual's health and wellbeing, with a plethora of interventions aimed at minimising stress more generally. The research literature regarding driving dis/courtesy, in comparison, is scant, with a handful of studies examining the dis/courteous driving behaviour of road users, and the relationship between driving discourtesy and driving stress.

Aim: To examine courteous and discourteous driving experiences, and to explore the impact of stress associated with such driving experiences.

Method: Thirty-eight drivers (20 females) from the Sunshine Coast region volunteered to participate in one of four 1–1.5 h focus groups. Content analysis used the verbatim utterances captured via an Mp3 device.

Results: Three themes pertaining to stressful and discourteous interactions were identified. Theme one pertained to the driving context: road infrastructure (eg, roundabouts, roadwork), vehicles (eg, features), location (eg, country vs city, unfamiliar areas), and temporal aspects (eg, holidays). Theme two pertained to other road users: their behaviour (eg, tailgating, merging), and unknown factors (eg, illicit and licit drug use). Theme three pertained to the self as road user: their own behaviours (eg, deliberate intimidation), and their emotions (eg, angry reaction to other drivers, being in control).

Discussion and conclusions: Driving dis/courtesy and driving stress is a complex phenomenon, suggesting complex intervention efforts are required. Driving discourtesy was reported as being highly stressful, therefore intervention efforts which encourage driving courtesy and which foster emotional capacity to cope with stressful circumstances appear warranted.

1. Introduction

Road crashes are amongst the 10 leading causes of deaths worldwide, with an estimated 1.24 million people dying on roads each year globally (World Health Organisation, 2013). Most road crashes are preventable and caused by human errors (Sarma et al., 2013; Rakotonirainy et al., 2014). Thus far, road safety research has concentrated largely on studying unsafe forms of driving behaviour such as aggressive driving (e.g., Dula and Geller, 2003; Lennon and Watson, 2011), angry and vengeful driving (Deffenbacher et al., 2000; Hennessy and Wiesenthal, 2005), stressed driving (Gulian et al., 1989; Hill and Boyle, 2007), and risky driving (Dula and Geller, 2003; Hill and Boyle, 2007). Risky driving in this case includes transgressive driving in which

road rules such as speed limits and safe following distances are deliberately violated (e.g., Berdoulou et al., 2013). It is noteworthy that, by its very nature, driving is cooperative and relies to a great extent on safe interactions between road users who occupy the same physical space on the roads (Faw, 2013; Harris et al., 2014; Portouli et al., 2014). As such, to avoid collisions, this cooperation necessarily relies not only on common knowledge of the road rules (and thus, road use legislation) by which drivers abide, but also courtesy between drivers. Accordingly, it has been recognised that shifting the attention to a more positive view of driving behaviour, including a greater focus on courteous and non-aggressive driving styles, and reasons for engaging in safe driving (e.g., makes you feel good, reduces stress levels and risk of crashes), could potentially be conducive in fostering positive motivation, attitudinal

* Corresponding author at: Adolescent Risk Research Unit (ARRU), Sunshine Coast Mind and Neuroscience – Thompson Institute, 12 Innovation Parkway, Birtinya, Queensland, 4575, Australia.

E-mail address: bscottpa@usc.edu.au (B. Scott-Parker).

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and behavioural changes beneficial for road safety more generally (Kleisen, 2013). Driving courtesy, and conversely driving discourtesy, recently has been of great interest in the public domain, and is of increasing interest in improving road safety.

1.1. Driving courtesy

Within the context of the road, driving courtesy refers to specific behaviours, subjective attitudes, and driver habits, and involves road users following set rules and norms for acceptable social behaviour. However, it also implies going beyond what rules and social norms would normally stipulate for a specific situation, in order to be kind, polite, and conscientious of other drivers and their goals (Hutchinson, 2008). Courteous driving, while self-sacrificial in nature, is underpinned by the principle of reciprocity which stipulates that most other drivers will exhibit similar courteous behaviours as has been shown to them (Goldman et al., 1981; Lonsdale, 2010). For example, Kleisen (2013) reported that young drivers believe in the notion of car-karma, in which drivers ‘get what they give’. Within such a context, encouraging courtesy on the road (e.g., positive car-karma) would benefit both the recipient and committer of the action, while also increasing road safety more generally. Regarding norms, Evans (1990) argues that changing social norms to increase courtesy on the roads is an important aspect of road safety, as it can encourage more respectful driving and consideration for the underlying motivation of others’ driving behaviour (e.g., the leading vehicle may be driving slowly due to having children in the back seat, rather than purposefully trying to annoy the following vehicle).

Courtesy on the road can aid traffic flow and help provide the best short-term effect for *all* road users, such as a smoother flow of traffic in congested areas where two lanes merge into one lane by drivers taking turn in merging. Further, formal traffic regulations and laws cannot cover all situations likely to occur in traffic. In ambiguous scenarios where there is insufficient formal regulation, drivers often rely on co-operation and common courtesy as a compensatory tool (Jonasson, 1999). Social rules governing courtesy in these situations are dependent on the rule of continuity (e.g., the moving car has the right to go first), the rule of competition (e.g., the first to the scene has the right over the traffic space), and the rule of positioning (e.g., actions undertaken give some groups a privileged position). Following these principles, particularly in circumstances in which road rules are ambiguous or not clearly understood by all road users (e.g., merging), cooperation and courtesy can be fundamental to resolving temporary conflicts in traffic, while deviations are considered impolite, discourteous, and a risk to road safety (Jonasson, 1999).

Courteous behaviours generally have a positive effect on road safety and reduce the risk of reckless, aggressive driving (Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2008) and poor road safety outcomes including crashes. However, courteous behaviours may produce dangerous situations, for example, when actions of a courteous driver are ambiguous, or when there is misunderstanding regarding the intended communication and signals of either driver (Faw, 2013; Hutchinson, 2008). Further, some courteous behaviours conflict with legislated road rules. Notable examples include drivers giving way at signed junctions, contrary to signage; and drivers giving way to entering vehicles in contrast to legislated merging road rules. Whenever there are deviations from normative regulations and rules, there is always an inherent risk of danger that other drivers may misinterpret the situations, due to ambiguity or lack of understanding. This is particularly the case in situations where cars are driving at greater speed and interactions and communications between drivers necessarily occur within a shorter timeframe. Thus, greater adherence to road rules is necessary to reduce the risk of higher impact road crashes. As such, courteous behaviour may be most practical and safe when vehicles are moving at a slower pace, such as in congested traffic.

Courteous driving may also have less apparent benefits, for example, when a driver creates space for another road user in less-busy

situations that consequently cause delays for the courteous driver. Such selfless actions are likely underpinned by the notion of being a ‘good citizen’ and viewing oneself as a helpful person (Lonsdale, 2010). Further, helping others promotes a consistency effect in which people who view themselves as moral continue to exhibit such behaviour to maintain their integrity and sense of self (Blasi, 1983). Interestingly, when exposed to the discourteous or aggressive behaviours of others, moral and courteous persons are more likely to compensate for these actions (Gino et al., 2009). For example, the driver may perform pseudo-altruism in which he comes to the assistance of another driver (driver B) who has been ‘wronged’ by a third driver (driver C), justifying any retaliatory behaviour as emerging from the sense of injustice and need to protect driver B from driver C. These findings also suggest that courteous drivers may seek to compensate for another driver’s discourteous behaviour, by showing greater courtesy to the recipient of the act (e.g., by letting them in or giving way to their vehicle).

In addition, research has demonstrated that people who express gratitude or thankfulness when they are the recipient of a kind act savour the experience more, have better subjective well-being and health, and cope better with stressful circumstances (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Expressions of gratitude (e.g., in a road context, a smile or friendly wave) also acts as a moral reinforcer by enhancing pro-social behaviours in both the recipient and the doer (McCullough et al., 2001). When a courteous person is thanked for their kindness, they feel socially valued, have greater self-worth, and are more likely to undertake the helping behaviour again (Grant and Gino, 2010). While no research has examined the effect of expressions of gratitude within a driving context, research in other fields suggest it would increase on-road courteous behaviours by fostering greater prosocial driving in both the recipient and the courteous driver (Grant and Gino, 2010; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

1.2. Driving discourtesy

While driving courtesy forms an important aspect of road safety, *discourteous* driving behaviour can have negative road consequences. Research demonstrates a link between aberrant driving behaviours – such as aggressive driving and transgressive driving – and traffic crashes (Deffenbacher et al., 2000). Aberrant driving behaviours have traditionally been classified either as errors (including slips and lapses) or road rule violations (Reason et al., 1990). Driver error may be due to poor or inadequate driving behaviours, and are typically unintentional deviations from the correct and/or legal driving behaviour (e.g., the driver made a mistake by not giving way at a ‘Give Way’ sign). In contrast, violations, which are motivation-based, are deliberate and intentional actions which can be undertaken to circumvent traffic rules that are fundamental in maintaining safe operations in potentially hazardous situations (Kontogiannis et al., 2002); for example, the driver intentionally did not give way at a ‘Give Way’ sign as a way of gaining their ‘early’ position in the flow of traffic.

Moreover, affect (e.g., feelings or emotions) is closely linked to driving behaviour; for instance, drivers are often motivated to perform or abstain from certain actions due to the feelings they attach to the behaviour (e.g., fast driving feels good versus fear of penalties which feel bad; Goldenbeld et al., 2000). Negative affect underlies subjective distress and has been linked to aversive mood states such as anger and aggressive behaviour, stress, poor coping, and greater frequency of unpleasant events (Roseborough and Wiesenthal, 2014; Watson et al., 1988). There has been increasing recognition of the negative impact of stress – which can derive from discourteous interactions during the drive – upon the individual’s health and wellbeing. Important for driving discourtesy, drivers often report feeling intense negative emotional states when they feel an injustice has been done to them on the road, particularly if the action is perceived as intentional and disrespectful (Lonsdale, 2010; Roseborough and Wiesenthal, 2014; Wickens et al., 2013a). A common emotional reaction to such perceived

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