



How are meaning in life and family aspects associated with teen driving behaviors?



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ABSTRACT

This series of two studies examined the unique and combined contributions of meaning in life and aspects of the family to the self-reported driving behaviors of young drivers. In Study 1 ($n = 155$), teen drivers completed the Sense of Coherence scale and two scales assessing family communication and satisfaction. The associations between these concepts and the self-reported driving styles of the young drivers were examined. In Study 2 ($n = 120$), a second sample of teen drivers completed the Purpose in Life test and the Family Climate for Road Safety Scale (FSRSS; assessing Modeling, Feedback, Communication, Monitoring, Noncommitment, Messages, and Limits). Associations were examined with the self-reported driving styles and reckless driving habits of the young drivers. Taken together, the findings of both studies indicate that higher meaning in life, better family communication, and a positive family climate in regard to safety are related to a higher endorsement of safe driving. The discussion stresses the need to include concepts that combine positive personal regard for life with support from the family in interventions aimed at enhancing safe driving among young drivers.

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1. Introduction

Even after controlling for number of drivers, miles traveled, and population size, young drivers, especially men, are overrepresented in car crashes compared to other age groups (e.g., Lotan & Toledo, 2007; Williams, 2003). In an effort to understand the driving behavior of teens, numerous studies have explored the contribution of various sociodemographic variables, personality traits, and environmental influences (e.g., Arnett, Offer, & Fine, 1997; McCartt, Shabanova, & Leaf, 2003; Taubman – Ben-Ari, Mikulincer, & Iram, 2004), while others have looked at family issues related to safety (e.g., Brookland & Begg, 2011; Simons-Morton & Quimet, 2006). However, although meaning issues have long been recognized to be of crucial importance during adolescence (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003), the potential association between the meaning a youngster attributes to life and the decision to drive in a certain way has received little attention. One recent study investigating this connection found that asking young drivers to think about the meaning of life and the feelings associated with this contemplation resulted in a lower intention to drive recklessly than a neutral condition (Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2012). The author suggests that when designing safe driving campaigns, encouraging teens to think about the meaning of life, that is, reminding them of the things worth living for, might help to reduce the willingness to engage in risk taking on the road.

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The current two studies explored this avenue further, while also drawing on previous research indicating the impact of the family on teens' driving behaviors. They therefore examined the unique and combined contributions of young drivers' perceptions of meaning in life and of their family to their reported behavior on the road, as expressed in driving style and reckless driving habits. Two approaches to familial aspects were employed: the global approach, assessing communication between the generations and the youngsters' satisfaction with their family; and specific reference to driving, examining the family climate for road safety, a relatively new concept which relates to multiple dimensions of the family's influence on teens' driving habits (Taubman – Ben-Ari & Katz–Ben-Ami, 2012, 2013).

1.1. Personal meaning in life

Personal meaning is an expression of the value people place on the events and flow of life and the significance they attach to their existence (Reker & Wong, 1988). It influences the choice of activities and goals, and endows life with a sense of purpose, personal worth, and fulfillment (Wong, 1998). To achieve meaning one must feel internally integrated, possess a sense of control over life, and form a satisfactory relationship with the environment (Battista & Almond, 1973). Perceptions of meaning in life have consistently been found to relate to psychological health and personality integration (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006), greater well-being, and lower psychological distress (e.g., Steger, 2009).

A related concept is Sense of Coherence (SOC), a personal trait that is at the foundation of an individual's coping with everyday life, as well as with stressful events (Antonovsky, 1979). Antonovsky contended that SOC has three core components: comprehensibility, that is, the perception that one's internal and external environments are structured, predictable, consistent, and clear; manageability, or the sense that life can be controlled and managed and that available resources will enable the individual to deal with the problems he or she encounters; and meaningfulness, which relates to the perception of life's demands as having meaning and being worthy of investing energy in. People high on SOC have been shown to manage stressful situations better than those with lower levels of SOC (Cohen & Dekel, 2000), and a strong association has been found between SOC and perceived psychological and physical health (Drory, Florian, & Kravetz, 1991).

Thus far, scant research has been devoted to the relationship between meaning in life and adolescent problem and health behavior in general (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2012), and risky driving in particular (Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2012). The existing findings are, however, unequivocal, indicating an inverse association between meaning and aggressive behaviors in school (Shek, Ma, & Cheung, 1994), and both past and anticipated aggressive or antisocial behavior (Brassai et al., 2012). In contrast, positive associations have been found between meaning and protective health behaviors such as nutritional and physical activity (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011). Similarly, previous studies exploring the connection between Sense of Coherence and driving reveal a positive correlation between the perception of driving skills and safety skills on the one hand, and Sense of Coherence on the other (Lajunen, Corry, Summala, & Harteley, 1998; Lajunen & Summala, 1995).

1.2. Family aspects and road safety

The important role of the family as a shield against involvement in risk-taking behaviors during adolescence has been indicated in many studies (e.g., Beck, Hartos, & Simons-Morton, 2005; Ferguson, Williams, Chapline, Reinfurt, & De Leonardis, 2001; Ginsburg, Durbin, García-España, Kalicka, & Winston, 2009; Miller & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2010; Simons-Morton, 2007; Williams, Cox, Hedberg, & Deci, 2000). In these, family relations, and especially parent–teen communication, have been found to be particularly significant.

In addition, the concept of Family Climate for Road Safety (FCRS) has recently been introduced to refer to the values, perceptions, priorities, and practices of parents and the family in regard to safe driving, as perceived by young drivers (Taubman – Ben-Ari & Katz–Ben-Ami, 2012, 2013). FCRS consists of seven dimensions: (1) Modeling – the model that parents provide to their children by their own modes of driving and attitude to traffic laws, including planning ahead so that they will not be pressed for time, obeying traffic regulations, driving safely even when they are in a hurry, tired, or feeling stressed, etc.; (2) Feedback – parents' positive feedback and encouraging comments to their offspring in regard to safe driving, and their ability to praise their children for safe and considerate driving; (3) Communication – open and direct communication between parents and adolescents in respect to driving behavior and risk taking, such as parents' tendency to teach the young driver how to anticipate potential hazards on the road, to openly discuss anything related to driving, including risky driving, and to include the young driver in framing the family "contract" regarding their driving; (4) Monitoring – parental supervision and monitoring of their youngsters' driving, including making sure they do not drive recklessly and having them inform the parents of where they are taking the car, who is going with them, and when they intend to be home; (5) Commitment to safety – parents' commitment to road safety, obeying traffic laws, and considerate driving, including the time invested in safety education; (6) Messages – parents' statement of clear verbal safety messages to young drivers that are understood by their children; and (7) Limits – the extent to which parents set systematic and clear-cut limits on adolescents' driving behavior and discipline them for traffic violations. This dimension includes the existence of clearly defined family rules regarding careful driving and the young driver's awareness that they will not be allowed to drive the car or that limitations will be imposed if they do not follow these rules (Taubman – Ben-Ari & Katz–Ben-Ami, 2012, 2013).

Findings relating to the FCRS (Taubman – Ben-Ari & Katz–Ben-Ami, 2012, 2013) reveal associations between positive factors of the scale and other global family assets, such as involvement, autonomy granting, communication, and problem solving, whereas the family's noncommitment to safety was associated with a poorer parent–adolescent relationship in

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