

## Editorial

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## Moral Reasoning in Driving Behavior

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Driving has become stressful, dangerous, and demeaning. Drivers report being stressed out, threatened by each other, exhibit bad moods, terrorize their passengers, and often fantasize violent acts against other motorists or bicyclists.<sup>1-3</sup> These serious issues indicate that there is a strong need for driving psychology and education that can help reverse this trend and change people's driving habits. Drivers need to be taught the moral dimension of driving, which indicates the character we have as a driver.<sup>4,5</sup> Research is needed to assess how drivers can be taught to assess their own driving personality as supportive or hostile, rational or impatient, calm or frustrated, error-free or making mistakes, and cooperative or opportunistic. There is a need for motorists to acknowledge that driving is a social activity that requires coordinated interactions.<sup>6</sup>

The recent dramatic spread of violence expressed with vehicles indicates the reluctance of drivers to scrutinize their own conduct, preferring to blame other drivers.<sup>7,8</sup> Drivers tend to have an inflated self-image of their motoring ability, rating the safety of their own driving as much better than the average motorist's. For instance, 2 out of 3 drivers rate themselves as almost perfect in how excellent they are as a driver (9 or 10 on a 10-point scale), while the rest consider themselves above average (6 to 8). Survey polls show that 70% of the drivers report about being a victim of an aggressive driver, while only 30% admit being aggressive drivers.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that most drivers overlook their own faults, and overestimate their own competence.

Interestingly, drivers who consider their own driving to be near perfect, also confess to significantly more aggressiveness than drivers who see themselves as still improving.<sup>9</sup> This reveals the lack of objectivity in self-assessment shown by every 2 out of the 3 drivers. Despite their self-confessed aggressiveness, they still insist on thinking of themselves as near perfect drivers with almost no room to improve. This egocentric phenomenon can be seen in specific forms of aggressive behavior. For example, those who see themselves as near perfect drivers, admit to twice as much of chasing of other cars compared to those who see themselves as less perfect. The difference: 15% vs. 8% is statistically significant.<sup>9</sup> The fact is clear: a part of being an aggressive driver is to deny that you need to improve. This indicates a resistance to change.

Wickens et al<sup>10</sup> found a moderate relationship between the scores on the "Driver Vengeance Questionnaire" and personality factors such as "narcissism" and "trait driver stress". Drivers who are vengeful feel that it is warranted for them to punish another driver who deserves it. James and Nahl<sup>11</sup> describe this attitude as the "vigilante" role that some drivers play out when driving. Bumgarner et al<sup>12</sup> report that drivers who score higher on a "forgiveness" measure and are less likely to express anger against other drivers, are less likely to behave aggressively.

Bianchi & Summala<sup>13</sup> report significant correlations between driving style of parents and their adolescent children. Part of this co-variance may be due to shared lifestyle habits between the parents and their children. But an additional factor is likely to be model learning. James<sup>2</sup> referred to the back seat of the family car as "road rage nursery". Parents with children in the car have an opportunity of modeling good driving behavior by refraining from aggressive driving and making hostile commentaries about other drivers. The parent's modeling of positive and supportive driving attitude can help adolescents identify with the moral dimension of

driving behavior. This process of moral learning has been described by researchers as progressive in stages.

## SOCIO-MORAL REASONING

Kohlberg analyzed the moral reasoning of the people of all ages and found that they differ in validity.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, many adults have an underdeveloped moral sense and still use reasoning patterns that are more appropriate for children. Applying these notions to driving brings into focus that driving behavior has two components. One is cognitive and rational, and the other is affective or moral. For many drivers these two components seem to act independently. For instance, new drivers may be inexperienced and undeveloped cognitively, but morally they may be advanced, acting with prudence and decency. Many experienced drivers may have highly developed cognitive skills while their moral feelings remain underdeveloped. They drive with impulsiveness and aggression unconcerned about the increasing risks and potential injury to others. They drive as if their moral sense is not relevant to their driving.

According to Kelman<sup>5</sup>, external compliance is mediated by externally applied reinforcement such as reward for obedience and punishment for disobedience. For instance, drivers who regularly drive over the speed limit can get preoccupied with ‘watching out for cops’, or when a driver suspects a certain location to be a “speed trap”. Instances such as these indicate that compliance to speed limits is occasioned by external threat. This is identified as stage 1-compliance.

Stage 2-compliance involves operating with drivers who are motivated to look out for other motorists and road users. They are preoccupied with ‘watching out for others’ out of concern or a fear of injuring them. This level of moral operation could be called “identification” with other highway users. With such an altruistic motivation, the driver is more likely to stay within the speed limit out of sympathy for the safety of other highway users, as for example a driver who thinks, “I better not follow so close. Don’t want to intimidate that driver.” In other words, drivers in stage 2-compliance can be expected to agree with attitude items such as: other drivers have rights; we must all be fair to one another; objectivity in dealing with driving exchanges is safer and more pleasant in the long run; and so on.

Deeper levels of internalization are theoretically possible as described by Kohlberg<sup>4</sup> on moral reasoning. Applying this approach to driving behavior, we can expect expressions of mutual concern, altruism, and religious values in connection with one’s driving experiences, as for example a driver who says, “I felt guilty for cutting in on that driver. They must have been really scared of not knowing whether I was going to hit them or not”, or “I keep thinking how closely I came to hit that man a while back. To think that I could be the cause of someone’s death or injury is really scary to me.”

## CONCLUSION

A recent study, investigated the relationship between socio-moral reasoning and traffic safety among drivers in the Netherlands.<sup>14</sup> The results showed that drivers in stage 1-compliance experienced a higher number of accidents, and drove faster and more aggressively. Interestingly, this relationship was more pronounced for men than women. It is clear that moral reasoning and socio-moral reflection ought to be present in driver education and public safety educational announcements. For example, public safety announcements on the radio routinely appeal for self-protection and financial cost as the motive for slowing down and driving cautiously. However, a few of the sports announcements make an appeal to the people’s sense of pro-social behavior and altruism by referring to the victims and their plight.

The moral dimension of driving has not yet become the focus of researchers and safety officials. Raising the moral thinking level of drivers in traffic may turn out to be an effective approach towards decreasing competitiveness and promoting cooperation with each other in the traffic.

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