



Anger while driving

Geoffrey Underwood *, Peter Chapman, Sharon Wright, David Crundall

School of Psychology, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK

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Abstract

This study examined the causal factors associated with anger while driving and the possible consequences of that anger on driving behaviour. Drivers kept diaries over a period of two weeks, detailing the events occurring during each journey in that time, with notes on events such as near accidents and on feelings of anger. The study examined the diaries of 100 drivers, who reported a total of 293 near accidents and 383 occasions when they experienced anger. The drivers also completed questionnaires that assessed a number of individual differences such as propensity towards mild social deviance and towards committing traffic violations. On a journey by journey basis drivers were more likely to report anger when congestion was present, but there was no evidence that the drivers who generally experienced higher levels of congestion also experienced more anger. The study found a strong association between the number of near accidents and occasions of anger a person experiences while driving, but this concealed two separate relationships. Near accidents frequently provoked feelings of anger, particularly where the driver felt that they were not at fault in the incident. However, there was also a separate link between the experience of anger in other situations and reports of near accidents where the driver was to blame. Such anger also appeared to be linked to mild social deviance and the commission of driving violations. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The prevalence of anger on British roads

Recent vivid reports of aggressive acts on the roads have led to an upsurge in interest in estimating the true prevalence of anger and aggression in drivers. A number of recent surveys have suggested that anger is a common phenomenon on Great Britain's roads. One survey (Automobile

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 0115 951 5313; fax: 0115 951 5324; e-mail: gju@psychology.nottingham.ac.uk

Association, 1995) reported that 90% of 526 motorists questioned had experienced “road rage” incidents in the previous year. Similarly, the Lex Report on Motoring (1996) claimed that 44% of drivers questioned had suffered verbal or gesticulatory abuse in the past 12 months from other drivers and that 9% of drivers had been forced to pull off the road because of aggressive driving by others. As well as being the recipients of aggressive acts, surprisingly high numbers of drivers admit to committing aggressive driving behaviours themselves. A study by Parker, Lajunen and Stradling (1998) found that 89% of 270 drivers admitted sometimes committing aggressive violations such as chasing other drivers, indicating hostility to other drivers, or sounding the horn to indicate annoyance with other drivers. The Lex Report on Motoring (1996) also specified the driving behaviours by others motorists that annoyed their respondents most intensely. Among such behaviours are drivers who cruise in the middle lane and fast lane, drivers who overtake on the inside lane and drivers who speed in towns and cities. A study by Deffenbacher, Oetting and Lynch (1994) found gender differences in the factors provoking anger in drivers. Female drivers were more angered by others’ illegal driving and by traffic obstructions whereas male drivers were more angered by nearby police presence and by others’ slow driving.

1.2. The relationship between anger and accident involvement

An issue of prime importance to traffic and transport psychologists is the possible effect that anger and the possible subsequent aggression has on driving performance and ability. Such researchers are particularly interested in the safety aspects associated with such emotions. Whereas emotions such as anxiety, depression and stress are widely acknowledged as having a detrimental effect on cognitive performance, the cognitive and behavioural effects of driving anger have received relatively little attention (Matthews & Desmond, 1995; Gulian, Matthews, Glendon, Davies & Debney, 1989). Deffenbacher et al. (1994) speculate that anger experienced while driving might affect safety in various ways. Referring to the large body of literature devoted to the emotion-cognitive performance relationship, Deffenbacher et al. postulate that anger might influence motivation to commit various risky driving behaviours that in turn may increase accident liability during the emotional episode. For instance they claim that anger experienced while driving might predispose an individual to engage in dangerous driving behaviours such as tailgating, speeding or flashing their lights.

Studies as early as the 1960s have identified a relationship between aggression and accident involvement. Schuman, Pelz, Ehrlich and Selzer (1967) found an association in young drivers between accident and violation history and propensity to become involved in physical aggression such as fights. Donovan and Marlatt (1982) found that a group of drivers with high violation and accident involvement rates also had high scores on the Buss–Durkee Hostility Inventory (Buss & Durkee, 1957) and scored highly on a questionnaire assessing driving aggression. Similarly, Wilson and Jonah (1988) examined the relationship between driving risk and aggression. They looked at individuals’ accident and violation histories and found them to be positively correlated with scores on subscales of the Buss–Durkee Inventory related to aggressive tendencies. Selzer and Vinokur (1974) made similar findings using questionnaires measuring aggression and hostility scores and also to establish accident histories.

Hemenway and Solnick (1993) found that those drivers admitting to having more altercations with other drivers also tended to have higher accident and violation histories. There is then a well-

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