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How do other people influence your driving speed? Exploring the ‘who’ and the ‘how’ of social influences on speeding from a qualitative perspective

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ABSTRACT

Using only legal sanctions to manage the speed at which people drive ignores the potential benefits of harnessing social factors such as the influence of others. Social influences on driving speeds were explored in this qualitative examination of 67 Australian drivers. Focus group interviews with 8 driver types (young, mid-age and older males and females, and self-identified Excessive and Rare speeders) were guided by Akers' social learning theory (Akers, 1998). Findings revealed two types of influential others: people known to the driver (passengers and parents), and unknown other drivers. Passengers were generally described as having a slowing influence on drivers: responsibility for the safety of people in the car and consideration for passenger comfort were key themes. In contrast, all but the Rare speeders reported increasing their speed when driving alone. Parental role modelling was also described. In relation to other drivers, key themes included speeding to keep up with traffic flow and perceived pressure to drive faster. This 'pressure' from others to 'speed up' was expressed in all groups and reported strategies for managing this varied. Encouragingly, examples of actual or anticipated social rewards for speeding were less common than examples of social punishments. Three main themes relating to social punishments were embarrassment, breaching the trust of others, and presenting an image of a responsible driver. Impression management and self-presentation are discussed in light of these findings. Overall, our findings indicate scope to exploit the use of social sanctions for speeding and social praise for speed limit compliance to enhance speed management strategies.

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1. Introduction

Drivers rarely operate in isolation; rather they share the road and the vehicle with others. Driving has been described as a socially regulated behaviour (see a review by [Stradling, 2007](#)) and speeding, a high-risk yet common behaviour, has received attention from social psychologists in an effort to better understand it. Previous research on the influence of others on driving speeds has canvassed a broad range of factors. Passengers have been found to play both protective and detrimental roles in influencing risky driving (including speeding), depending on the age and gender of driver and passenger ([Conner, Smith, & McMillan, 2003](#); [Regan & Mitsopoulos, 2001](#)). Normative influences have also been studied; how driver perceptions of the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of important others towards speeding can influence driving speeds (for examples see [Conner](#)

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et al., 2003; Elliott, 2001; Elliott, Armitage, & Baughan, 2005; Fleiter, Watson, Lennon, & Lewis, 2006; Forward, 2006, 2009; Letirand & Delhomme, 2005; Parker, Manstead, Stradling, Reason, & Baxter, 1992; Warner & Aberg, 2006, 2008). To a lesser extent, research has considered how the social traffic environment can influence driving speeds.

The social nature of traffic environments refers to our interactions with other road users. Perceptions about the speed of other vehicles appear influential in speed selection (Hagland & Aberg, 2000). Connolly and Aberg (1993) described the social comparison or contagion model of speeding which suggests we adopt a speed according to comparisons made with the speed of others on the road. Research examining this proposition has indicated that the majority of participants overestimated the speed of other drivers, stated that they wished to drive like other drivers, and reported that other drivers would believe they were driving too slowly (Aberg, Larsen, Glad, & Beilinson, 1997). This suggests that the mere presence of other drivers on the road can influence driver perceptions and potentially therefore, their driving speeds.

Taken together, the findings cited above demonstrate the potential of other people to influence driving speeds. However, in the quest to reduce road trauma linked to excessive speeds, authorities continue to rely almost exclusively on legal sanctions such as monetary fines and demerit point penalties to regulate speeds and modify driver behaviour (Fildes, Langford, Andrea, & Scully, 2005; Groeger & Chapman, 1997). While this approach is not without success, little attention has been paid to harnessing the influence of others in speed management (Hatfield & Job, 2006; Parker, Stradling, & Manstead, 1996).

This reliance on legal sanctions stems from traditional deterrence principles which focus on the perceived risk of apprehension and perceptions about the certainty, severity and swiftness of penalties if apprehended (Homel, 1988). For each driving episode, subjective beliefs about the likelihood of apprehension, together with judgments regarding potential legal penalties are proposed to determine the degree to which an individual is deterred. However, despite the intuitive appeal of this theory, research across a range of behaviours, including risky driving behaviours such as speeding and drink driving, suggests that such perceptions about legal consequences do not necessarily deter behaviour and, in some cases, may actually do the opposite (see Fleiter & Watson, 2006; Freeman et al., 2006; Pogarsky & Piquero, 2003; Watson, 2004a).

Attempts to refine traditional deterrence principles have included the addition of vicarious learning; observing the behaviour of others (Stafford & Warr, 1993). Including the role of others in the deterrence equation acknowledges the importance of those around us in shaping behaviour. Additionally, research outside the road safety field has considered the role of extra-legal sanctions in modifying behaviour such as socially-based consequences which have been shown to exert independent and strong effects on the extent of deviant behaviour (for a review see Zimmerman, 2008).

Another theory used to examine social influence is the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). A key TPB concept is the *subjective norm*; beliefs about what important others would expect us to do, coupled with our motivation to comply with these expectations. This theory has been applied to better understand a range of road user behaviours including drink driving, dangerous overtaking, close following, speeding, and risky motorcycling (Parker et al., 1992; Stradling & Parker, 1997; Warner & Aberg, 2006; Watson, Tunnicliff, White, Schonfeld, & Wishart, 2007). However, it has been argued that the normative-intention relationship is the weakest part of the theory because of the narrow focus on the expectations of other people (Elliott, 2001; Terry, Hogg, & White, 2000). Additional components such as moral norm and group norms have been used to further investigate the realm of social influence in the TPB with some success (Godin, Conner, & Sheeran, 2005; Gordon & Hunt, 1998; Watson et al., 2007). However, the TPB does not specifically encompass intrinsic factors such as emotion or arousal (Fylan, Hempel, Grunfeld, Connor, & Lawton, 2006). Furthermore, it appears to lack the ability to fully explain why enforcement influences our behaviour (Siegrist, 2004).

One theoretical approach to studying deviant behaviour that focuses strongly on social influence as well as on intrinsic and enforcement-related factors is Akers' social learning theory (SLT) (Akers, 1998). This theory emphasises the importance of the people and groups with whom we associate and posits that deviance and conformity are learned in the same way, with the balance of influence stemming from the way behaviour is punished and rewarded. This theory has been applied to understand a variety of deviant behaviours (see Akers & Jensen, 2003) and has been used in the road safety context to examine travelling as a passenger with a drinking driver (DiBlasio, 1988), and more recently, to speeding (Fleiter & Watson, 2006), and unlicensed driving (Watson, 2004b). Essentially, the role of other people is central to each of the theory's four components.

Firstly, *Imitation* refers to modelling the behaviour of others. Secondly, *Definitions*, refers to personal attitudes and moral beliefs about a behaviour which can be shaped over time by significant others. Thirdly, *Differential association* refers to our interactions with other people and has two distinct dimensions. The behavioural dimension relates to direct exposure to the behaviour of others via our associations and interactions with them. The normative dimension relates to our exposure to the values and norms of the people with whom we associate and interact. Finally, *Differential reinforcement* refers to the overall balance of anticipated/actual reinforcements (i.e., punishments and rewards) associated with a given behaviour with reinforcements described as both social (e.g., praise, embarrassment) and non-social (e.g., anxiety, excitement) in nature. Overall, SLT emphasises exposure (direct and indirect) to the behaviours, attitudes, and norms of those with whom we mix as well as intrinsic and socially-based reinforcements. This theory offers a useful framework to investigate the impact of social influence on driving speeds as well as additional factors that are lacking in the more traditional theoretical approaches described above.

As noted above, research has demonstrated that legal and extra-legal sanctions or punishments can exert independent, significant effects on criminal behaviour (Zimmerman, 2008). Extra-legal sanctions can be self-imposed and result from behavioural performance that is known by the individual to be morally wrong (e.g., guilt). Alternatively, the sanction can be socially-imposed. An example of a socially-imposed sanction is the embarrassment associated with reactions from salient others when they become aware of the behaviour. Embarrassment has been described as an internal reaction arising from

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