Safe Driving Climate among Friends (SDCaF): A new scale

Noga Guggenheim, Orit Taubman – Ben-Ari*

The Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

Abstract

Reckless driving among young people, especially young men, is a major cause of injury and fatalities the world over. Like other aspects of this age group, young drivers’ driving behaviors and norms are influenced by the accepted social discourse of their peers. Yet despite extensive existing knowledge on young drivers, very few studies have dealt specifically with their characteristic friendship relations. This lacuna in the literature may reflect the absence of specific research tools for examining driving with friends.

To fill this gap, we conducted a series of studies with 706 young drivers (aged 17–24) of both sexes aimed at developing and validating a multidimensional scale designed to examine the effect of the social relations of adolescents and young adults on their driving. Entitled Safe Driving Climate among Friends (SDCaF), the final scale consists of 19 items, which tap four dimensions of driving with friends: friends’ pressure; social costs of driving with friends; communication with friends about driving; and shared commitment to safe driving. The validity of the scale was established by examining associations between its four dimensions and various variables of personality, friendship, and driving.

The findings indicate good reliability and validity, with the three variables of resistance to peer influence, self-disclosure, and personal responsibility for safe driving yielding positive associations with the SDCaF dimensions communication and shared commitment to safe driving, and negative associations with the dimensions friends’ pressure and social costs. General tendency to respond to social pressure was positively associated with the dimensions of friends’ pressure and social costs, and negatively associated with shared commitment to safe driving. Gender differences were also found, with men scoring higher than women on friends’ pressure, and lower than women on shared commitment to safe driving.

The SDCaF can serve as a research tool, as well as a diagnostic instrument for detecting susceptibility to reckless driving among young drivers, thereby aiding in the design of targeted educational and intervention programs.

1. Introduction

Reckless driving among young people, especially young men, is a global problem and a major cause of injury and fatalities around the world (Allen and Brown, 2008). In Israel, for example, the proportion of young drivers who are involved in serious accidents is 1.7 times higher than that of drivers aged 25 and over (NRSA, 2015; Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Studies show that the tendency to take risks while driving serves functions such as a sense of power, self-esteem, and social recognition (McKenna and Horswill, 2006; Steinberg, 2007), and is frequently related to gender roles (Rosenbloom et al., 2009; Simons-Morton et al., 2011a; Taubman – Ben-Ari and Skvirsky, 2016).

The behaviors and attitudes of young people, including their driving, are influenced by the accepted social discourse of their peers (Curry et al., 2012; Horvath et al., 2012; Winston and Jacobsohn, 2010). Friends are a source of security, as they share social activities, thoughts, and feelings, and provide emotional support and a sense of belongingness (Blos, 1979; Larson et al., 2012). Thus, friendship relations have the power to reduce personal insecurity, as well as to mitigate the sense of loneliness experienced by many adolescents forced to cope with new tasks as they mature (Erikson, 1968; Larson et al., 2012). In addition, the equal status and interconnectedness that exist within a group of friends may promote shared social values and contribute to a sense of solidarity and mutual responsibility (Larson et al., 2012; Salasky et al., 2014).

The social development of adolescents and young adults therefore significantly enhances the need to spend time with their friends. Most friendships are described in positive terms, such as love, trust, and

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☆ Corresponding author at: The Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 52900, Israel.

E-mail address: taubman@biu.ac.il (O. Taubman – Ben-Ari).
support, but there are also negative components, including mistrust, conflict, and social pressure to engage in risky behavior. Thus, while studies indicate that the natural process of socialization at this age involves positive elements of friendship relations (Newirth and Frederick, 2004; Nygaard et al., 2003), the influence of friends is often cited as a major cause of adolescents’ problem behavior. Clearly, then, both the positive and negative features of friendship come to bear in adolescents’ socialization, and may influence their ability to deal with complicated situations, such as driving with friends (Allen and Brown, 2008; Horvath et al., 2012; Shulman and Laursen, 2002; Sumter et al., 2009).

According to psychosocial and developmental theories (e.g., Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1968), young people tend to adhere to the norms that exist within the group they belong to. In regard to young drivers’ behavior, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1985, 2002) suggests an explanation to taking risks while driving (e.g., Brijs et al., 2014; Cestac et al., 2011; Elliott et al., 2013), through three general principles that guide the human behavior in general:

- **Attitudes**, which refers to the overall assessment of a person’s performance; Subjective norms, referring to the subjective social norms and opinions of others as perceived by the person who performs the behavior; and Perceived behavioral control, which refers to subjective evaluation of the behavior, e.g. the personal perception of the control one has on his or her behavior, whether it is hard or easy to perform (Fig. 1 illustrates the pathways of these principles).

Given the importance of friends which is common among developmental theories (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1968), it seems that the principle of subjective norms, as it is formulated in the TPB, is particularly relevant among the three principles. The subjective norms might contribute to the accumulated understanding of driving with friends, which is the core of our study.

When the perceived social norms encourage risk taking in general, and behind the wheel in particular (e.g., by perceiving risky driving as accepted behavior or providing positive feedback for dangerous behavior on the road), they may lead to excessive speed, drinking and driving, or ignoring traffic rules (Cestac et al., 2011; Conner et al., 2003; Perkins, 2014; Perkins et al., 2010; Scott-Parker et al., 2013, 2015; Simons-Morton et al., 2012; Taubman – Ben-Ari and Lotan, 2011).

Many studies have dealt with the influence of peers on dangerous driving, comparing adolescents’ behavior when driving alone and when driving with friends in the car, and have considered age, gender, number of passengers, and their connection to the driver. Most such studies report increased risk when a group of young people are in a car together (Fleiter et al., 2010; Foss and Goodwin, 2014; Guimet et al., 2013; Rhodes et al., 2015; Simons-Morton et al., 2011b).

Nevertheless, young passengers might also help to reduce risky behavior by encouraging responsible driving (Guggenheim and Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2015; Fleiter et al., 2010; Simons-Morton et al., 2011b; Rhodes et al., 2015). Indeed, previous studies have identified the potential for friends’ positive influence on young drivers, and recommended exploring the components and conditions of this influence (Chapman et al., 2012; Horvath et al., 2012; Lenne et al., 2011; Scott-Parker et al., 2015).

The current series of studies sought to expand understanding of the social circumstances of driving, relating, for the first time, to specific variables of friendship, such as the quality of the relationship, communication, disclosure, and the model set by friends, in the context of young drivers’ driving behavior. From a variety of potential variables related to young drivers, we have chosen for the current studies those, which have been proven to be relevant to driving with friends, as well as those which were identified in a preliminary qualitative study on the subject (Guggenheim and Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2015). Given the abundance of studies relating to other aspects of young drivers, the gap in the literature is surprising. It might, however, stem from the absence of appropriate research tools for evaluating the associations between features of friendship that are relevant to driving and risk taking on the road. Such a tool would make it possible to investigate the associations between the nature of friendship and the nature of driving, as described and interpreted by young drivers.

The aim of the current series of four studies was therefore to construct and validate a multidimensional scale of driving perceptions and behaviors among friends. Entitled Safe Driving Climate among Friends (SDCaF), the scale is designed to examine the friendship relationships of young drivers and their connections to driving behaviors.

Study 1: Principal components analysis. This study focused on construction of the scale, formulating items based on the findings of preliminary qualitative research, as well as on existing tools relating to friendship in general and the family climate of road safety. The result was a 19-item scale tapping four content areas: friends’ pressure while driving; social costs of driving with friends; communication between friends about driving; and shared commitment to safe driving with friends.

Study 2: Confirmatory factor analysis. This study confirmed the four-factor structure of the 19-item scale.

Study 3: Construct validation. This study sought to establish the validity of the new scale by examining associations between its four dimensions and three relevant variables: resistance to peer influence; self-disclosure; and personal responsibility for safe driving.

Study 4: Further validation of the SDCaF. This study aimed to provide additional validation of the scale by examining the associations between its four dimensions and the general tendency to respond to peer pressure.

2. Study 1: principal components analysis

The purpose of Study 1 was to construct the SDCaF and validate its factors using principal components analysis (PCA). In addition, the associations between the SDCaF factors and sociodemographic variables (gender, age), as well as driving-related variables (frequency of driving, driving experience), were examined.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 346 young drivers (174 men, 172 women), ranging in age from 17 to 23 (M = 19.36, SD = 1.09). The mean driving experience of the participants was 21.04 months from the date they received their driver’s license (SD = 11.73). About 75% of the participants drove at least once a week, with a large proportion of them (45%) driving even more frequently; the remainder (25%) drove less than once a week and up to twice a month.

2.1.2. Instruments

Safe Driving Climate among Friends (SDCaF). The scale was developed on the basis of existing questionnaires drawn from the fields of
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