



Deconstructing a gender difference: Driving cessation and personal driving history of older women

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Abstract

Problem: The purpose of this study is to understand the reasons behind older women's driving cessation by comparing the driving histories of Finnish women who either gave up or renewed their drivers license at the age of 70. **Method:** A mail survey was sent to all Finnish women born in 1927 who gave up their license in 1997 ($N=1,476$) and to a corresponding random sample of women who renewed their license ($N=1,494$). The total response rate was 42.1%. **Results:** The length and level of activity of personal driving history were strongly associated with driving cessation and continuation. Ex-drivers tended to have an inactive driving career behind them, whereas drivers had a more active personal driving history. In addition, those women with an active, "male-like" driving history who had decided to stop driving gave reasons for driving cessation that were similar to what is known about older men's reasons to give up driving. The results suggest that the decision to stop driving is related to driving habits rather than gender.

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Keywords: Older drivers; Driving cessation; Gender; Driving history; Deconstruction

1. Introduction

Driving cessation in older drivers has been the subject of several studies since the early 1990s (Campbell, Bush, & Hale, 1993; Chipman, Payne, & McDonough, 1998; Forrest, Bunker, Songer, Coben, & Cauley, 1997; Gallo, Rebok, & Lesikar, 1999; Hakamies-Blomqvist & Wahlström, 1998; Marattoli et al., 1993, 1997, 2000; Persson, 1993; Rabbit, Carmichael, Jones, & Holland, 1996). In these studies, a constant finding has been the distinctive gender difference in the process of driving cessation. Women drivers are more likely than men to voluntarily give up driving, at a younger age, and in better health (Gallo et al., 1999; Hakamies-Blomqvist & Wahlström, 1998; Rabbit et al., 1996). In other words, whereas men tend to keep on driving as long as their health allows them to, women give up driving for various, less pressing reasons (Hakamies-Blomqvist & Wahlström, 1998).

This gender difference has significant impact on both safety and mobility. Voluntary driving cessation of older drivers has mostly been discussed as positive behavior implying good judgment (Persson, 1993), without consid-

ering possible negative implications. Previous studies focusing on the consequences of driving cessation have, however, shown it to be related to personal mobility loss and decrease in out-of-home activities (Marattoli et al., 2000), along with increased depressive symptoms (Marattoli et al., 1997). In addition, most available alternatives for car driving are less safe for older persons (OECD, 2001). Therefore, voluntary driving cessation at a relatively early old age may indeed be problematic because it may restrict mobility without increasing safety. Since early retirement from the wheel mainly concerns older women, the underlying reasons and components for the found gender difference become essential in preventing early driving cessation and mobility loss of older women.

In social and behavioral sciences, the socially constructed nature of most gender differences is emphasized. That is, such differences are based and constructed upon the social roles and positions of genders in the social realm. Thereby they can also be deconstructed and unraveled beyond the plain term "gender." Since higher level complex behavioral patterns (e.g., driving behavior) can hardly originate to gender per se, attempts to deconstruct the concept "gender" may be especially appropriate when dealing with apparent differences between women and men in traffic. A social constructionist approach has, however, rarely been applied

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in the field of traffic research. Neither has the commonly found gender difference in driving cessation been analyzed or conceptualized any further. On the few occasions in literature when there have been attempts to explain this difference, this has been loosely done and not well anchored in relevant empirical findings. Speculative explanations have included references to, for example, psychological (Burkhardt, Berger, & McGavok, 1996) or physical (Campbell et al., 1993) differences between the genders and, implicitly, to women- and men-like driving habits (Burkhardt et al., 1996; Gallo et al., 1999).

The aim of the present study is to gain a deeper and more detailed understanding of older female drivers' driving cessation. We chose to do this in a within-gender setting by comparing women who gave up versus renewed their license at the age of 70 years. The aim was not to replicate the common gender effect finding, but rather to understand the factors that lead to an older woman voluntarily ending her driving career as opposed to sticking to her license "like a man." The study's focus was on driving habits and experience.

2. Materials and methods

A mail survey was sent to all Finnish female license holders born in 1927 who did not renew their driver's license at the age of 70 in 1997 ("ex-drivers"), and to a random sample of female license holders born in 1927 who did renew their license ("drivers"). (In Finland, driver's licenses are valid until the age of 70 years. After that, a new license has to be applied for every 5 years, after which they expire if not renewed.) The original samples, both consisting of 1,495 individuals, were drawn from the driver's license register maintained by the Finnish vehicle administration center. The register of ex-drivers was ordered as complete. However, there were 19 women in this register whose addresses were not available, and these were not included in the final sample ($N=1,476$). The register of drivers, in turn, was ordered in a random order, and the first 1,495 on the list were taken to form the sample. There was one woman in this group whose address was not available, and she was not included in the final sample ($N=1,494$). A total of 1,251 (42.1%) questionnaires were returned; 810 were completed by drivers and 441 by ex-drivers. No reminders or follow-ups were sent to those not returning the questionnaire. After the removal of incomplete answers, the following analyses are based on 1,198 cases (799 drivers; 399 ex-drivers).

Personal driving history was assessed by using questions about past and recent driving habits (including annual kilometers and the frequency of driving), the total length and extent of the driving career (years of being licensed driver, years of active driving [i.e., 6 months or more annually], and total kilometers driven), experiences while driving, and the reasons for driving cessation or license renewal.

Table 1

The means and *SD* of drivers' and ex-drivers' annual driven kilometers at different points of driving career prior to omitting the outliers

Time after licensing	Drivers (%)		Ex-drivers (%)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1–10 years	8,897	12,665	8,299	21,539
11–20 years	10,583	17,390	9,347	27,417
21–30 years	12,150	27,083	8,944	25,599
31–40 years	10,361	25,263	8,978	23,214
41–50 years	8,617	11,053	3,044	3,530

For comparisons of subgroups defined by driver status, an independent samples *t* test was used for continuous variables and Pearson's χ^2 for categorized variables.

The data of average annual kilometers at different time points of respondents' past driving career was corrected by omitting a few outlier values to control the effects large standard deviations in the analysis. The means and standard deviations for both drivers and ex-drivers prior to correction of the data are presented in Table 1. Targeting and omitting the outlier values was done by using standard scores 4 (when $n>300$), 3 (when $n=80-299$), and 2.5 (when $n<80$). A total of 16 values from drivers' data and 6 values from ex-drivers' data were omitted.

3. Results

3.1. The driving career

The drivers had been licensed as drivers longer than the ex-drivers ($M=33$ and 31 years, respectively; $t=3.05$, $p<.01$, $n=1097$). Drivers also had had more active driving careers than the ex-drivers: they had more years of driving (a minimum of 6 months) in relation to the age of their licenses ($t=16.81$, $p<.001$, $n=1148$). The average ratio (active years per licensed years) for drivers was 0.92 and for ex-drivers 0.33. Moreover, the total amount of kilometers driven per licensed years was higher for drivers ($M=7,588$, $s=7,854$) than the ex-drivers ($M=4,056$, $s=10,978$; $t=3.65$, $p<.001$, $n=899$).

3.2. Past driving habits

The respondents were asked to retrospectively report about their driving at different times in the past, that is, during the first 10 years after licensing, 11–20 years after licensing, 21–30 years after licensing, 31–40 years after licensing, and 41–50 years after licensing.

Throughout their driving history, drivers had larger annual mileages than ex-drivers (Fig. 1). The differences were statistically different at four measurement points: 11–20 years after licensing ($t=2.10$, $p<.05$, $n=672$), 21–30 years after licensing ($t=3.05$, $p<.01$, $n=590$), 31–40 years after licensing ($t=3.15$, $p<.01$, $n=385$), and 41–50 years after licensing ($t=2.62$, $p<.05$, $n=98$).

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