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Personality and Individual Differences 43 (2007) 2116–2126

PERSONALITY AND  
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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# The influence of public self-consciousness and anger on aggressive driving

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Received 6 March 2007; received in revised form 6 June 2007; accepted 26 June 2007

Available online 20 August 2007

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## Abstract

This study examined how anger interacted with public self-consciousness to influence aggressive driving. It was hypothesized that when people were angry, more aggressive driving behavior would occur when public self-consciousness was low than when public self-consciousness was high. To test this hypothesis the participants were required to complete measures of driving anger and public self-consciousness. Then participants gave a retrospective self-report of aggressive driving behavior. Further, participants were required to keep a log in which they recorded aggressive driving behavior. The results supported the prediction. Public self-consciousness interacted with anger to influence aggression while driving.

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**Keywords:** Aggressive driving; Anger; Public self-consciousness

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## 1. Introduction

Anger while driving an automobile is a common experience. Underwood, Chapman, Wright, and Crundall (1999) reported that over the course of two weeks 85% of drivers became angry

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while driving. Similarly Neighbors, Vietor, and Knee (2002) found that drivers reported feeling angry at least every day, and Joint (1995) found that 60% of drivers reported becoming angry while driving. Further, anger is more common while driving than other activities (Parkinson, 2001). There are a number of situational and personality variables that may account for these high levels of anger. For example, the driving situation may produce frustration because driving is usually a goal directed behavior that on many occasions is blocked (Novaco, Stokols, & Milanesi, 1990). That is, most drivers are attempting to arrive quickly at a destination. Road conditions and the behavior of other motorists often prevent or block drivers from attaining this goal. This type of blocked behavior often results in feelings of frustration that produce anger (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939; Gnepp, 1979; Hennessy & Wiesenthal, 1999; Shinar, 1998). In addition, driving is a situation where people are exposed to high levels of provocation. Neighbors et al. (2002) found that in a 10 day period 24% of drivers reported making rude gestures to other drivers. Further, the driving situation is one of the few situations in which the behavior of another person can directly and immediately threaten physical well being. This type of provocation reliably produces anger (Bettencourt & Norman, 1996). Beyond situational variables, a number of personality and individual differences variables relate to the experience of anger while driving. Most notably Deffenbacher and his colleagues have documented individual differences in the tendency to become angry while driving (Deffenbacher, Huff, Lynch, Oetting, & Salvatore, 2000; Deffenbacher, Lynch, Oetting, & Yingling, 2001).

Even though anger is a common experience while driving, actual aggressive behavior while driving is relatively uncommon (Parker, Lajunen, & Summala, 2002). In retrospective self-reports only moderate correlations between anger and aggressive actions have been found (Neighbors et al., 2002). The modest relationship between anger and aggressive driving is not surprising. Anger is not considered a sufficient condition to produce aggression in most of the influential theoretical explanations of aggression, (e.g., the cognitive-neoassociation theory Berkowitz, 1989, 1993), the general aggression model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), and the social information processing model (Huesmann, 1988, 1998). In these theoretical formulations, aggression is the product of a complex interaction between anger and both situational and personality variables. Consequently, it seems likely that the amount of aggressive behavior while driving would largely be dependent on an interaction between the amount of anger experienced and the conditions that enhance the expression of aggressive behavior. That is, aggressive behaviors while driving will be the product of interactions between anger and both situational and personality factors that facilitate the expression of aggression.

A number of situational factors present while driving have been explored. For example, the driving situation may create feelings of anonymity that increase the likelihood that anger will lead to aggression. Feeling anonymous may cause the driver to perceive that there is a reduced risk of detection and punishment from others for behaving aggressively (Lowenstein, 1997; Zimbardo, 1969). Ellison, Govern, Petri, and Figler (1995) and Ellison-Potter, Bell, and Deffenbacher (2001) have found evidence that anonymity increases aggression in the driving situation. The driving situation may also increase feelings of invulnerability and personal power. These feelings may make people believe that they are immune from the consequences of aggressive behavior and consequently make them more likely to act aggressively when they become angry (Fineran & Bolen, 2006).

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