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# Submission Cover Sheet

## Inquiry into Dangerous Driving

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# The Psychology Of Dangerous Driving

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Submission to the Inquiry Into Dangerous Driving.
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[redacted]

I request publication of my paper, including my full name, on the Committee's and any other website as required.

# The Psychology Of Dangerous Driving

**Rod Pitcher**

## Abstract

This paper discusses the social and personal factors which encourage and discourage obedience to the laws regarding dangerous driving and driving at speeds above the speed limit, how those factors should be understood from a psychological point of view and what could be done that might influence them.

## Introduction

It becomes apparent when reading the literature that the two best ways of reducing dangerous driving are increasing the risk of detection and causing offenders some sort of social stigma. Further, the seriousness of the offence must not be based on the person's own judgement of their own ability to cope with the speed, or other social and personal factors that may be present.

## Understanding The Problem

McKenna (2010) notes that within professional circles, the connection between speeding, dangerous driving and accident rate is non-controversial, but amongst non-professionals it is not commonly accepted, for reasons that are not immediately apparent. He adds that one often encounters opposition to the connection. Often the emphasis in driver-training and other circles is the notion of 'inappropriate speed for the conditions' rather than speed *per se*. This notion ignores the fact that the driver may not have the skill to determine the appropriate speed for the conditions. McKenna (2010) states: "If the drivers did have that skill then there would be no relationship between speed and accident rate". It is also well known that most drivers are unable to judge their own level of skill.

One of the strongest influences causing people to drive dangerously is social pressure. When speeding and dangerous driving are common, other drivers may join in rather than conform to the law. This has been shown by many studies.

For any deterrence to work, it must cause social stigma or isolation, but any punishment cannot cause social stigma or isolation if it is commonplace. As long as speeding and dangerous driving are very common, then any punishment will not cause social stigma and isolation.

Another factor is the probability of detection. It could be argued that with speeding the probability of detection is so low that drivers will not change their behaviour because of the low risk of detection.

There is much discussion in the media as to the motives of the authorities. If people believe that the authorities are using speeding fines as a way to increase revenue rather than to reduce the risk of accidents, then there is a loss of trust in the authorities, and drivers will be less willing to defer to the authority and obey the law.

Personal interest is also a factor in speeding and dangerous driving, particularly in the form of thrill-seeking or being late for an appointment. This personal interest will be a barrier to obeying the relevant laws.

After travelling at high speed for a some time, the perception of speed decreases, and the speed seems slower. Reduced visibility also has the tendency to cause one to increase speed. The low sounds made by modern cars will also affect speed, in that the lower the noise level from the engine the lower the perceived speed. Thus speeding may not always be intentional but may due to changes in perception

> If we consider speed as the output of the combined effects of the driver, the vehicle and the road, then the sheer number of people breaking the speed limit represents a massive system failure. (McKenna (2010) p.213)

Gormley and Fuller (2010) set out to test the hypothesis that young male drivers' decision-making is influenced very little or not at all by the possibility of serious consequences of a collision while driving dangerously, and that they are influenced by the perceived standards of their peers, a concept called 'false consensus', and so increase their own risk-taking. If this is so, then their perceptions might be modified by focused media campaigns or improved driver education and training.

The research for the paper was carried out at a World Rally Championship racing event in Ireland. They interviewed a sample of 1,039 young male drivers (210 were not usable), asking about their past speeding and dangerous driving offenses, awareness the consequences of a collision, and perceptions of peer-group behaviour. The researchers found that many of the young males interviewed were aware of the risks they were taking and stated an intention to slow down and drive more safely in the future.

Fleiter and Watson (2005) indicate that there are a number of factors which relate to the frequency of dangerous driving. These include role models who speed, attitude to dangerous driving, previously un-punished speeding and dangerous driving and perceived deterrence. The paradox referred to in the title is that there is often a mis-match between beliefs and actions. For instance, a person might know that speeding as wrong and dangerous, but still do it.

The results of this study indicate that drivers often perceive 'degrees of danger' in which the acceptance of speeding depends on the speed limit in a particular area, such that speeding in a 100 Km/hour zone is seen to be less dangerous and more acceptable than in a 60 Km/hour zone. It also appears that a 'tolerance' of 4 to 7 Km/hour above the speed limit by the authorities indicates to most drivers that driving that much above the speed limit is acceptable.

Newnam, Lewis and Warmerdam (2014) report an experiment in behaviour modification designed to reduce dangerous driving amongst a group of work-related drivers. They monitored the driving, including speeding, of 16 drivers for 3 weeks, providing written feedback to the drivers at the end of each week. As they expected, there was a significant reduction in speeding after the intervention, thus indicating the effectiveness of behaviour modification in reducing the incidence of dangerous driving. However, they also admit to some limitations to their work, including the feedback being weekly rather than more often and the limited number of participants.

According to the theory of planned behaviour, drivers who see little or no reward for respecting driving laws will be more likely to speed and drive dangerously. This attitude is also affected by the opinions of friends, spouses and other significant associates. The attitude will also be modified by the driver's own beliefs as to her or his own level of skill. Paris and Van den Broucke (2008) set out to design a questionnaire to gather data for or against this theoretical stand. Questionnaires were given to 184 participants, 116 were returned. The participants were female and male, and covered a wide educational and occupational range. Of those returning the questionnaire, 55 were monitored for 3 weeks, with a focus on speeding and other driving offences and habits. Paris and Van den Broucke (2008) claim that their study demonstrates that there is a large difference between self-reported and actual speed related activity which may have caused errors in the predictive value of the questionnaire.

Lewis, Watson and White (2008) set out to test the efficacy of anti-speeding campaigns based on positive and negative emotional appeals in influencing self-

reported speeding behaviour. They found that such campaigns can influence speeding more than past speeding behaviour. They argue that their findings are important as they suggest that future advertising campaigns will be able to influence behaviour. Positive messages were much more effective than fear-based approaches. The authors stress the importance of follow-up measures in achieving the required effect. Oddly, females responded exactly opposite to males to much of the advertising.

Lewis, Watson and White (2008) do point out some limitations to their study due to the small sample group and the self-reporting nature of the responses, although they claim that other research has shown that self-reporting does provide suitably accurate data.

**Counter-Points**

The above authors provide suitable data, analysis and arguments to support their conclusions. The papers have all been peer-reviewed and published in journals of adequate reputation to support their validity and quality. Although it should be noted that some of the authors point out important and significant limitations to their results. I recognise the value of the papers and conclusions, but I do have some qualms and questions, based on my own observations and research which should be taken into account. In this section I discuss my thoughts in this direction.

McKenna (2010) argues that the use of automatic speed-cameras, and warning signs of their presence, can make the certainty of detection very high and will thus reduce speeding.

However, I would counter-argue that speed-cameras are only effective in their own immediate area, and almost certainly won't have any effect on speeding in areas where there are no cameras.

My observations of speed-camera vans, which are highly visible, show that they only cause speeding drivers to slow down and observe the speed limit in the immediate area covered by the camera. Once drivers are past the van, and no longer under observation, they tend to increase their speed again.

Thus the presence of the van only causes a speed reduction in its own immediate area. Where no van is present, there is no deterrent, and so no reduction of speeding. This strongly suggests that the use of speed-camera-vans doesn't have much effect on speeding in other areas where there is no chance of being caught and thus no deterrence.

An ABC Canberra News (2021) story recently looked at some of the information about the effectiveness of speed-camera-vans. The story quoted a Monash University study which found that there was a reduction of collision risk *near the van's location* [emphasis added]. Note, that there is no data about the situation *away from the van's location*.

I have a problem with the paper by Gormley and Fuller (2010) in that the interviews were carried out at only one location, a car racing venue, where one might expect to find a large number of young males who were attracted to speed. I have to wonder whether they would have achieved the same result at some other very different event, perhaps a church social? A follow-up to see how many of the young men who expressed an intention to slow down and drive more safely actually did so, would also have been useful.

Most of the research discussed here depends on self-reporting by the participants. Although it is claimed that past research has found self-reporting to be reliable and accurate, I have doubts in relation to speeding and dangerous driving. Shame and guilt might cause under-reporting and bravado and boasting might lead to over-reporting. Also, given some of the psychological factors relating to speeding and dangerous driving, it seems to me that there is a high probability that many drivers are not consciously aware of just how much dangerous driving they actually do. Any of

these factors would make the value of data obtained from self-reported speeding highly questionable and unreliable.

**Discussion**

The situation is that some people will speed and drive dangerously, regardless of the consequences for themselves or others. Nothing will stop them, not higher fines, loss of licence, nor any other deterrent. Others may have their behaviour modified and improved with suitable training. Whether or not such training is effective depends on many factors which also affect the person's attitude to dangerous driving, as described in the papers discussed above.

This suggests that driver training should be directed towards modifying those attitudes in young drivers, before they are allowed on the road. Whether that would be possible, or effective, is a question that needs an answer. Even with such training, the literature suggests that there will be people who speed an drive dangerously, either because they have not taken the training seriously or the training has not worked, or just because of their attitude to dangerous driving, speeding, and the road rules in general. In this case the person's attitude to the regulations would have to be changed.

Such training might need to be prolonged in some cases, and would be expensive, so who should shoulder the cost? Society or the learner driver? And what about those who fail to benefit from the extra training? Will they be refused a driving licence, or allowed on the roads anyway?

Of course, some people will be responsible drivers without this training. Will they be required to go through the training anyway?

Many young people these days consider a driving licence is their right rather than a privilege that has to be earned. How would they respond to being forced to do all this training before they could get a licence? It might just cause a lot more people to drive without a licence, which might be worse than the current situation.

There is also the question of whether society has the right and should be allowed to change peoples attitudes in this way. Some people might see it as a form of brainwashing. Would 'conscientious objection' be a valid reason to be exempted?

These difficulties are likely to become very political.

**Opinion**

I think that there are good arguments for having hidden speed cameras. If potential speedsters don't know where the cameras are located there is more chance of their being caught, and so more deterrence. The fact that openly-visible speed-camera-vans are not catching many speedsters (ABC Canberra News. (2021)) despite the high level of speeding that is obvious to everyone on the roads, clearly shows their ineffectiveness.

I don't object to the Government using speed cameras to raise revenue to pay for the consequences of speeding and dangerous driving – the cost of injuries, cost of the cameras, and extra work for the police. Dangerous drivers are anti-social individuals who should be made to pay society for the costs of themselves breaking the law, rather than those costs falling on people who respect and obey the law.

I would also like to see stronger campaigns pointing out and stigmatising speeding and dangerous driving as an anti-social and dangerous activity. Perhaps pointing out to the general public that their lives (and their children's lives) are being put at risk by those irresponsible people who drive dangerously would raise awareness of the anti-social aspects and its dangers, which might, hopefully, result in more attention to the problem from governments.

Perhaps there is also a need for learner drivers to pass a psychological examination as well as the practical one of being able to control a vehicle, to prove their mental and psychological suitability to be allowed control of a car.

A final comment, paraphrasing the ABC:

> If anyone is particularly upset about being caught speeding, it is worth remembering that having to pay a speeding fine is entirely voluntary — *you have to choose to speed and break the law to get one!*
> [emphasis added] (ABC Canberra News. (2021))

**Postscript**

How does all this relate to the statement that 'the Police [Assistant] Commissioner said that speeding increased markedly over COVID lockdowns'?

Media reports indicate that there was a rise in speeding over the 'lock-down' period, but none of them provided any evidence to support their statements. Also, notice that different sources gave different figures for the rise in speeding offenses.

*The Canberra Times* (2020) said 'ACT drivers used the less crowded roads over the lockdown period to raise their speeds, with offences up by over 51 per cent.'

*9News* (2020) reported '*Assistant Commissioner* Libby Murphy has revealed there has been a 30 per cent increase in the number of drivers speeding and driving dangerously during the coronavirus lockdown.' [emphasis added].

*7News* (2020) said 'Motorists are naively believing the roads are safer with significantly less traffic about since the COVID-19 lockdown. But law enforcement authorities are booking record numbers of drivers for speeding and reckless behaviour on our roads in the past few weeks. One in four drivers has admitted to taking increased road risks since the implementation of the lockdowns, according to research undertaken by the Australian Road Safety Foundation.

The increased speeding appears to have been a world-wide phenomenon.

I don't really have an answer for the question, but perhaps some suggestions to think about.

> Was there less traffic on the roads and so apparently less danger in speeding?
>
> Were people so afraid of contracting the virus while being out and about that they were in a hurry to return to the safety of their homes, and considered the danger in speeding less than in catching the virus?
>
> Perhaps some people thought that they might catch the virus and die so they became fatalistic about being killed in a speeding accident?
>
> Was there less traffic on the roads so that speedsters were more obvious?
>
> Maybe there just happened to be more people on the roads who felt like speeding?

Was the ‘markedly’ increased speeding just a casual, unsupported observation, or is there evidence that more people were speeding?

I was unable to find any proper evidence that might have provided an answer to any of these question.

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