

Sharing social space with strangers: setting, signalling and policing informal rules of driving etiquette

Alexia Lennon^a, Mark King^a

^a Centre for Accident Research and Road Safety – Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, K Block , 130 Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove 4059, Australia

Abstract

Recent research suggests that aggressive driving may be influenced by driver perceptions of their interactions with other drivers in terms of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ behaviour. Drivers appear to take a moral standpoint on ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ driving behaviour. However, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in the context of road use is not defined solely by legislation, but includes informal rules that are sometimes termed ‘driving etiquette’. Driving etiquette has implications for road safety and public safety since breaches of both formal and informal rules may result in moral judgement of others and subsequent behaviours designed to punish the ‘offender’ or ‘teach them a lesson’. This paper outlines qualitative research that was undertaken with drivers to explore their understanding of driving etiquette and how they reacted to other drivers’ observance or violation of their understanding. The aim was to develop an explanatory framework within which the relationships between driving etiquette and aggressive driving could be understood, specifically moral judgement of other drivers and punishment of their transgression of driving etiquette. Thematic analysis of focus groups ($n=10$) generated three main themes: (1) courtesy and reciprocity, and the notion of two-way responsibility, with examples of how expectations of courteous behaviour vary according to the traffic interaction; (2) acknowledgement and shared social experience: ‘giving the wave’; and (3) responses to breaches of the expectations/informal rules. The themes are discussed in terms of their roles in an explanatory framework of the informal rules of etiquette and how interactions between drivers can reinforce or weaken a driver’s understanding of driver etiquette and potentially lead to driving aggression.

Introduction

Considerable research has been devoted to understanding aggressive behaviour on the road. In recent research (Lennon & Watson, 2011; Lennon, Watson, Arlidge & Fraine, 2011) the authors have explored how drivers perceive their interactions with other drivers in terms of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ behaviour, and take a moral standpoint. ‘Right’ or ‘wrong’ driving behaviour is not defined solely by legislation. In addition to the formal rules of driving, there are informal rules that are sometimes termed ‘driving etiquette’ (Page, Jones & King, 2013) or ‘courtesy’ (Hutchinson, 2008; Jonasson, 1999). These are essentially implicit behavioural norms.

Unlike formal rules, driving etiquette is *context-based*, i.e. two different settings with the same formal rules may have different forms of driving etiquette. This situation is somewhat familiar to people who drive in different cities or regions within a country, while it is more obvious to people who travel from one country to another. At the same time, interaction between individuals has a fundamentally *human* character, as described by Goffman (1963). It is notable that Goffman, in *Behavior in Public Places* (1963), specifically mentions traffic behaviour but does not unpack it in detail. The road system is a public space; it is typically developed and maintained by governments as a public good, although even toll roads involve the same degree of sharing by a wide range of individuals. Unlike most interactions between people in public places, use of the road system has a framework of formal rules, which might explain why driving etiquette has tended to receive less attention than compliance with legislation. In addition, driving a vehicle gives a degree of visual anonymity that is not shared by people who mix in public places, and constrains the range of

possible interactions and communications between people. The mix of formal and informal rules, contextual and human factors, makes driving etiquette a more complex topic for study than it might first appear.

Better knowledge of driving etiquette or the informal rules held by drivers has implications for road safety and public safety. Previous studies suggest that behaviours included as part of driving etiquette may include waving when another driver allows you to merge, and the flashing of headlights as a warning signal for other drivers (Lennon & Watson, 2012). While these rules of driver etiquette are not officially recognised, breaching and/or adhering to these norms may result in moral judgements of and/or by others. This in turn may lead to irritation, frustration or anger, and to thoughts that there is a need to 'teach them a lesson' or enact retaliatory behaviours, some of which could be risky or aggressive (Lennon & Watson, 2011). At the same time, the informal nature of norm development and the many influences on norms mean that drivers may not share the same norms; moreover, a driver may espouse norms which are in contradiction with each other (Fleiter, Lennon & Watson, 2006; Fleiter & Watson, 2006). Despite the anecdotal identification of implicit norms of driving etiquette, no research has focused on specifying and defining (1) what norms are held by drivers in a given context and the level of agreement about them, and (2) drivers' attitudes and beliefs about them and their likely behavioural consequences. The relatively unformed state of knowledge in this area points to the need for exploratory research. Improved knowledge in this area may assist in reducing aggressive behaviours on road, including those that are also risky, or may inform interventions to help drivers manage the aggressive/risky driving of others (or themselves), which may benefit safety.

This paper outlines qualitative research that was undertaken with drivers to explore their understanding of driving etiquette and their perceptions of their typical reactions to other drivers' observance or violation of their implicit driving norms or rules. The aim was to develop an explanatory framework (or signposts to a framework) within which the relationships between driving etiquette and aggressive driving could be understood, specifically moral judgement of other drivers and punishment of their (perceived) transgression of driving etiquette.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from a convenience sample of students and employees at an urban university campus in Brisbane, Australia, along with people who had heard about the study from others associated with the university in some way. A total of 42 people (26 women, 16 men) attended one of ten focus groups that were stratified according to 'generation' based on the reasoning that different generations of drivers (e.g. 'baby boomers' versus 'generation Y') may be socialised differently, or have different implicit driving norms, attitudes and judgements. However, there did not appear to be age differences in the nature of the issues raised in the groups so the analysis was conducted on all transcripts together. Gender composition of the groups also varied, though all but one group had both men and women. The exception was the 55 years and older group, which consisted only of three women.

Procedure

Focus group discussions began with an introduction to the facilitator and the general aim of the study (that is, to explore driver experiences and learn about unwritten or informal rules of driving). Participants were asked first to think about their everyday driving experiences. The facilitator then posed the initial question: "When you think about your everyday driving, what would you say are

the expectations that you have about how other drivers should behave towards others?" Probe questions then followed on from the issues and interests arising in each focus group. Once group members appeared to have said all they wished to say in relation to this first question, subsequent questions focussed on their views about whether other drivers shared the same expectations as they did, and whether they thought that there were 'unwritten' rules, and if so, what they would describe these as being. Later questions were designed to explore how drivers respond to others' breaches of their expectations or the informal rules, and whether they themselves ever breached their own rules. These later questions and probes were also aimed at teasing out driver cognitions, especially judgements of others, and their feelings in relation to perceived breaches of expectations. During the discussions, there were comments from participants about interactions with other road users such as pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists. Although these are important relationships in the overall issue of driving, the authors view them as likely to be sufficiently different from driver to driver relationships that they are worthy of investigation in their own right. It was beyond the scope of this study to focus on them and no specific questions were included about these. This could be an important area for future work.

Analysis

Six of the ten focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed in real time by a professional stenographer. Remaining discussions were audio recorded and the researcher/facilitator (AL) later made detailed notes from the recordings. The transcripts were analysed in an inductive process by one author (AL) and an independent researcher for emergent themes. Following the separate coding the researchers compared the themes identified. Although inter-rater reliability was not calculated statistically, there was a high level of agreement between the two coders on the key themes. In addition, a process of critical reflection was undertaken during the analysis in order to identify an explanatory framework within which to understand driving etiquette.

Results

With two notable exceptions, issues, and the themes that were identified in relation to them, were very similar across groups, suggesting that the expectations drivers have of others and themselves do not vary appreciably over age/generation, and so the planned analysis by age group was abandoned and all transcripts were considered together. Below, the three main themes, Courtesy, reciprocity and two-way responsibility; Acknowledgement; and Breaching etiquette are elaborated, with examples given as verbatim quotes. Gender and age group of the speaker are identified for longer quotes (in parentheses following the quote).

Theme 1: Courtesy and reciprocity, and the notion of two-way responsibility

In response to being asked about their expectations of others on the road, all groups either began by declaring they expected others would be 'courteous' towards everyone else on the road, or they rapidly converged on this theme. Participants talked about respect, good manners, and being mindful of others. There was also a dimension of reciprocation within the notion of courtesy. This was described as "give and take" (Woman 35-50) or was referred to in the same context as making allowances for others in anticipation that they would then do the same. In one group consideration of others was even linked to Australian traditional values and "a culture of mateship" (Man 25-30) and fairness. However, some participants highlighted that reciprocation and consideration was not universally held among drivers, and that some people maintained double standards: "some people expect others to be polite to them but they won't be polite to everyone else" (Woman 18-24).

While inevitably the definition of courtesy was associated with an expectation of others knowing and following the formal road rules, participants also described less formal 'rules' or expectations. These included that others would exercise patience with traffic circumstances such as having to wait, would be aware of the behaviour of others (especially erratic driving) and "make allowances" (Woman 25-30) for this by adjusting their own driving, or be "generous" (Woman 25-30) to others, and would avoid "...getting upset too easily" (Woman 35-50) or interpreting the behaviour of others as deliberately designed to be antagonistic or inconvenient. Interestingly, drivers in one of the 25-30 years groups suggested that being more experienced drivers placed the onus on them to be accommodating and cooperative in situations where other drivers might be less experienced.

Participants were asked whether they thought that everyone had the same expectations of others when driving. While overall, adhering to the formal rules and being courteous to others was seen as easy to do, and therefore somewhat inexplicable when drivers didn't do this, participants also acknowledged that breaches of both formal and informal rules and expectation were evidence that people thought differently about this.

[do others have the same expectations?] I'd say not. You've just got to look at the way some people drive their cars. People who are always in a rush, there's no way that they have the expectation that 'oh I should leave a gap. I should give people enough room'. They just don't care. I can't see them sharing the same expectations as someone who thinks you should be courteous. (Man 25-30)

In relation to the formal road rules, there was acknowledgement of the purpose of these while at the same time drivers also appeared to recognise that adherence depends on mutual agreement, as expressed by one driver:

There's a degree of trust implicit in being on the road... [that] People do what they are required to by law and also an expectation of courtesy. When that trust is breached by changing out of that safe passage, that is where accidents or incidents occur. (Man 35-50)

A question that emerges from these accounts of an informal set of rules that are shared, is how these rules are learned. The subsection below notes the influence of specific traffic situations.

Examples of expectations about behaviour

Giving way was an important feature discussed as part of expectations of others on the road. This was mentioned by each group to a greater or lesser degree. Courtesy was specifically described by one group (25-30 years) as involving giving way even when not strictly required to, if the circumstances appeared to demand this. It was seen as part of managing safety and risk: "[You have to] Lean toward minimising the risk even if it is not in the rule book, err on the side of caution" (Man 25-30) or towards "hazard reduction" (Woman 25-30) even if privately cursing under one's breath.

Merging behaviour was a special case of the expectation of courtesy within giving way and appeared in descriptions of courtesy: "if there is like a lane that is finishing and then you let that person in kind of thing, like that's good manners" (Man 18-24). In each group, merging courtesy included this notion of merging as turn taking as well as an acknowledgement of the importance of doing this in order to help traffic flow, spread the burden of delays and display consideration:

I always let cars in, in that situation [turning into heavy traffic], at least one. Then you expect the others behind to let in one. Quite often you are in this situation and nobody opens up to let you in. (Woman 35-50)

When you see this in action [one for one turn taking] it actually works. (Woman 35-50)

However, there was also the ‘rule’ that a driver was only obliged to allow a single other to merge, as discussed by three participants in a 25-30 years old group:

Woman 1: I think there’s a certain - Like if there’s a line that’s been going for ages and ages and ages. And someone’s [another driver] also been waiting, but not in line, hmmm, its difficult...

Woman 2: yeah

Man 1: yeah...difficult...

Woman 1: It’s difficult to judge [what to do]. Personally for me, if it was me, and I’ve been waiting in line for a while and I can see there’s someone who’s going to have trouble getting in, I’ll well “go on then” [let them merge]

Woman 2: Yeah. But I would say, just one though. If there’s a line of people. Cos if you let one go [merge, enter the lane], often another one will try and push in and I get quite upset. ‘No, no. Wait till the next guy’. You know, I’ve let one in. I’ve done my thing. That’s it

Conversely, failure to facilitate such merges or “taking advantage” was seen as unnecessary discourtesy, as captured below:

You let one person go through [in a merging or give way situation] and all of a sudden five of them go because you have been way too nice about it. Then you stop feeling okay about it and start feeling angry. (Woman 18-24)

Another informal rule appeared to be in relation to what speeds drivers should be using. While there was no apparent acceptance of illegal speeds in any of these groups, drivers spoke of their expectations that no one should drive under the speed limit either, and there were descriptions of high levels of irritation and reaction to drivers who did drive substantially under the limit (see below). Drivers also expressed that an informal rule was ‘the right hand lane is for speeders’ and that this was an accepted among drivers. In Australia, traffic laws in each state specify that the right hand lane be used for overtaking. Fines apply for inappropriate use if detected by police. However, these lanes are not special speed zones, and the same speed limits apply to them as to the other lanes on the same segment of road. At the same time as describing this informal rule, people in each group also acknowledged that they didn’t agree that people should speed (which was not defined by participants or the facilitator). However, they also referred to a driving norm that people in the right hand or outside lane should not hold up other traffic or let other traffic build up, even if those others are driving at an illegal speed:

There is an expectation that, if you are in the right lane, you shall exceed the speed limit. The right lane is for like ‘I have got to get there’. (Woman 18-24)

Outside lane is for speeders and overtakers - don’t use it if you aren’t doing that. (Man 25-30)

An informal rule that, while not universally held was mentioned by some and not censured by the others in the groups, deserves special mention for its contradiction to the other points in relation to etiquette: tailgating. Tailgating was generally described as a behaviour intended to pressure a slower driver to speed up, and was reported by drivers who appeared to be aware of this as dangerous and intimidating:

I have done like [tailgated]– [for] people slowing down - I don't tailgate as much as other people. I do get closer. In my head I am going, ‘I] need to slow down.’ ...Sometimes I will semi-tailgate them for the same effect: ‘You are an idiot, speed up.’ That makes them scared. At the same time, it is horrible if someone did that to me. Most times I back off. (Woman 18-24)

It appears that a large proportion of drivers may hold the informal rule that everyone should drive at the speed limit, rather than accepting this as the maximum speed for the road section. Failure to drive at the speed limit appears to be a sufficiently great breach of informal rules, possibly because

of the potential to impede the progress of others, to justify tailgating in retaliation. As illustrated above, such drivers may have highly ambivalent feelings about tailgating, and find ways to rationalise their own behaviour while paradoxically acknowledging the negative emotional impact on the recipient as well as the physical risk.

Theme 2: Acknowledgement and shared social experience: ‘giving the wave’

Waving, smiling or nodding to acknowledge another driver spontaneously arose as a key theme in all but one of the groups. Drivers described ‘giving the wave’ to show appreciation of another driver’s consideration and had expectations that others would similarly acknowledge their considerate actions. Groups varied in their apparent perceptions of the importance of doing this, with two of the groups (an 18-24s and a 25-30s) spending quite a bit of time discussing their experiences and views about acknowledging others and being acknowledged. Participants in one of these two groups expressed relatively strong emotion in relation to this:

The wave is so important. If someone gives me a wave, they are my best friend in the entire world. If they don’t, I hate them, especially if you go out of your way...It is just etiquette. When I do that [go out of my way], I expect a wave. (Man 25-30)

Those in the other group for whom this was an especially important issue also referred to a more generalised effect. Drivers who acknowledged others were perceived as relaxed and courteous; those who failed to acknowledge the efforts of others through some form of acknowledgement were regarded as not only rude but as more likely to break the road rules or be generally uncaring about others. That is, drivers made more general attributions about the other and his or her conduct in everyday life. Participants in this group made reference to recognising that they may be stereotyping others by thinking in this way, but also thought that they would still be affected by their responses. One participant described reducing this negative effect by reminding herself that others don’t really have to acknowledge her and that it is not important enough to allow it to have a big impact in the overall scheme of driving.

As well as being an informal thank you, acknowledgement appeared to have the function of creating a level of connection between drivers, an indication of shared values, and a signalling of awareness of voluntary cooperation, as well as humanising the shared experience of driving. This was expressed in a way that suggested that it enhanced the experience of driving, and acted against the depersonalising aspect of being enclosed in a vehicle and separate from others on the road:

...it is like that kind of people connection. You can be driving around and you don’t really....you are not really viewing them [other drivers] as individuals. You are viewing them as cars. You are not thinking about them as people. If someone does something, acknowledges or whatever, then you see more the person and not just the car. (Woman 55+)

‘Giving the wave’ was also seen as a way of being able to apologise or acknowledge to other drivers that one had made a mistake. This too was seen as facilitating inter-driver harmony and safety. Interestingly, one driver expressed the view that waving might be a peculiarly Australian behaviour and related to culture. In making this observation, the same driver related having used an acknowledgement wave while driving in the USA and thought that it had been perceived as aggressive rather than appreciative.

Theme 3: Responses to breaches of the expectations/informal rules

Breaches of the road rules or informal etiquette elicited feelings of anger and frustration for drivers in every age group. Examples of breaches included descriptions of others behaving in ways that ignored consideration for the circumstances and other drivers’ patience, for instance, when

attempting to circumvent the impost of congestion on all drivers by ‘queue jumping’. One driver referred to this as follows:

[traffic is] banked up for kilometres. They will [transgressor] get in their own lane and go straight up on the inside [road shoulder]. Everybody else seems to think, ‘We are in this position, we can’t do anything about it, we have got to put up with it, let’s not lose it [our tempers]’, except for a couple of young kids. I looked whenever that did occur but they are all the very young, impatient P platers, [they think] ‘[I’m]fed up with this’, they get in their own lane and fly. It’s totally illegal. Where is the etiquette in that? (Man 35-50)

Some drivers offered explanations of others’ breach behaviour that were based in individual characteristics such as, that others were deliberately selfish, that they didn’t care, were thoughtless in relation to driving, or that they had separate rules for themselves from those they had for others. Other explanations focussed more on skills or knowledge-based factors and regarded discourteous driving as a result of poor role models for driving, or as lack of knowledge of the formal as well as informal rules, or a failure to appreciate “the bigger picture” (Man 25-30). These explanations together may be interpreted as representing a conflict in values between drivers who approach driving more from an individualistic perspective versus those who recognise the inherent collective nature of road use and the need for cooperation. Courteous drivers accept that everyone is subject to inconvenience in order to share the road safely, rather than seeking to benefit at the expense of other road users

As described in relation to responses to acknowledgement from other drivers, there were psychological responses to the breaches of the informal rules. Participants admitted to making negative attributions of other drivers in response to these breaches, which were perceived as a violation of the expectation of reciprocation:

I feel like ‘Why do you do that?’ kind of thing, you are putting other people in danger and you are not being nice to people who are being nice to you. If I am doing a nice thing I deserve the same gratitude back. If everyone is nice on the road, it would be a more peaceful place and you wouldn’t have as many crashes and as much danger on the road. (Woman 18-24)

Drivers in the older age groups, while still admitting to frustration and anger when other breached their expectations on road, were more inclined to express motivation to “let it go” (Woman 35-50), and avoid reacting. Some drivers referred to this as a maturational process:

As I’ve got older I have changed the way I see things and tend to look at reasons that people may be doing what they do and give benefit of doubt-it reduces stress. (Woman 35-50)

I used to be more aggressive when I was younger but I just don’t let it [others’ behaviour] bother me now. There is no point in being frustrated anymore. (Man 35-50)

There was also evidence that inconsiderate or rude/discourteous driving was taken as a personal slight among the younger drivers, and that it indicated that the offending driver had “demeaned” the other or “diminished my status” (Man 25-30). Such breaches were sometimes perceived as being deliberate or within volitional control rather than a result of a lack of awareness or skill: “I think ‘jerk’, not ‘you are a sh** driver’” (Woman 25-30). Other younger drivers appeared to generalise the offending driver’s behaviour beyond the immediate situation:

...if you are being this much of a bad person on the road, I would hate to tick you off...because you always hear stories about people stopping at traffic lights [and becoming confrontational]...if I was in that situation [someone becoming aggressive towards him], I would not know what to do...that is why I want to keep a bit of distance: If I tick that guy off, something bad could happen. (Man 18-24)

Breaches of informal rules were also associated with behavioural responses for some drivers. For example, some younger drivers described using the horn to indicate their frustration and anger, and described subtle distinctions in how the horn could be used, for instance blips on the horn versus blasts for different levels of frustration or transgression. These comments and accounts can be interpreted as attempts to police the informal rules or coerce compliance from other drivers.

Although the conversation around responding to breaches of informal rules suggested that in the main, drivers did not act on their thoughts or feelings in terms of their driving, there were descriptions of more problematic reactions. Several younger drivers reported adopting hostile and aggressive responses which included speeding up to get a good look at the offending driver and glaring at them, honking the horn, and deliberately driving too closely (tailgating). As already described above, tailgating was one response to drivers who were not driving at the speed limit. Some drivers in the older age groups also used other intimidatory behaviours to convey their criticism of inconsiderate driving:

The other night someone annoyed me. I followed them and followed them. I took the next corner [after doing that] knowing it was going to make them think. It is my way of educating them....letting people know they were stupid in my opinion. (Man 35-50)

However, the earlier quote noted that “If I tick that guy off, something bad could happen” (Man 18-24), which indicates an awareness that a driver’s attempt at retaliation, ‘punishment’, or signalling of disapproval of a perceived violation of the informal rules, could potentially escalate into more serious altercations, and potentially high risk behaviours (e.g. tailgating, pursuit, forcing off the road) or interpersonal violence.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that there are some shared understandings of how drivers should behave in situations not covered by the formal road rules. These were centred on expectations that everyone would demonstrate general respect and courtesy for other drivers, as well as expectations that everyone follow the road rules. Special instances of informal rules applied to merging behaviour and other situations where one is not obliged to give way, but consideration for others and good etiquette demands it (e.g. for long queues of cars trying to enter congested or peak hour traffic). Informal acceptance of illegal behaviour also appeared in the rule relating to the use of the right hand lane for speeding. Acknowledgement appeared to hold an important place in managing relationships with other drivers, functioning as a way of connecting with them or being rewarded for good etiquette. For some drivers it was critical to their emotional responses and presumably to their subsequent behavioural responses.

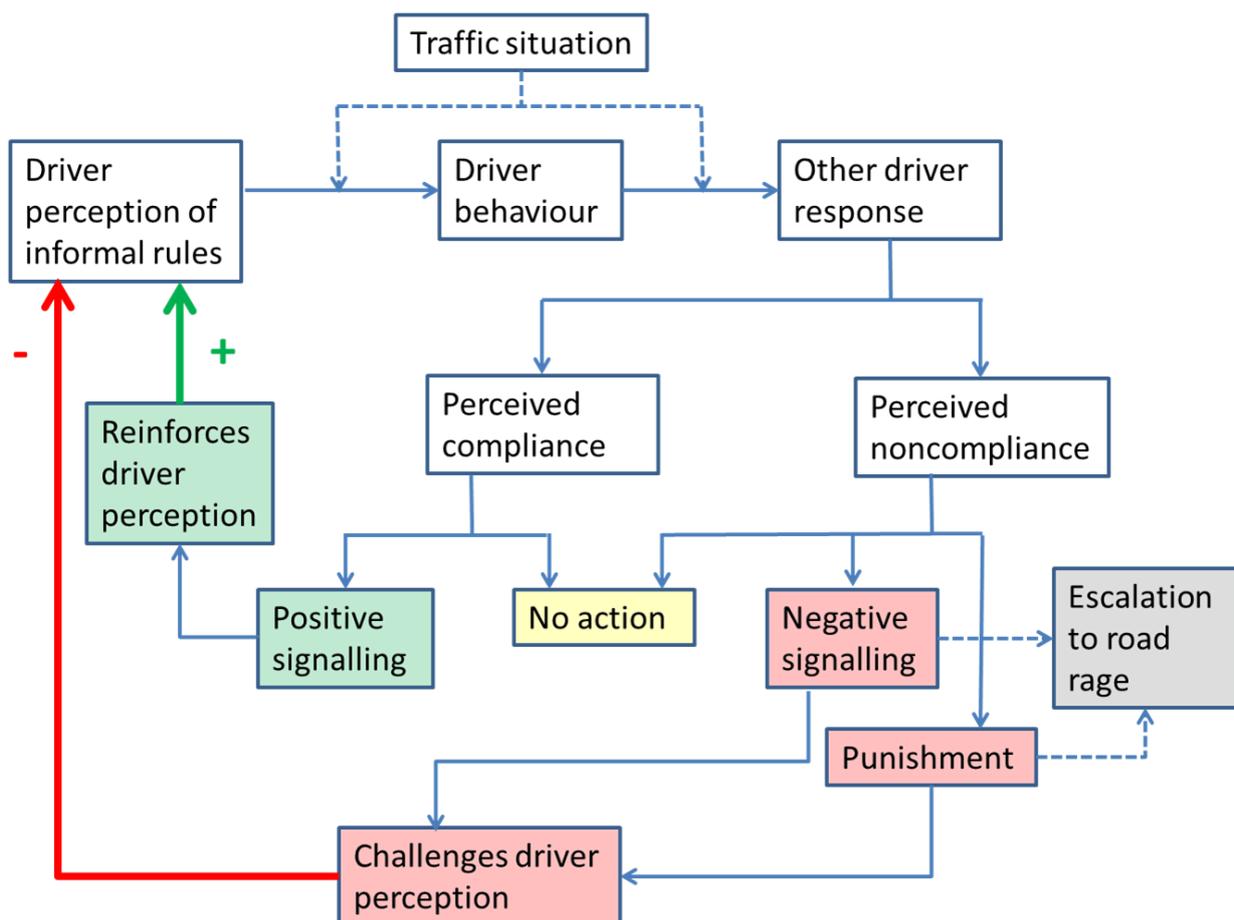
However, drivers in our study acknowledged that not all other drivers accept or adhere to the same understandings of what these informal rules are or where they apply. It may be that drivers who took breaches of informal rules as evidence that others didn’t share the same understanding are correct; that is, the informal rules are not universal across drivers or driving cultures. Alternatively, drivers who breach informal rules may be fully aware of the existence of such expectations (may even hold these themselves) and simply be choosing to benefit at the expense of the group, applying the double standard referred to by some of the drivers in our study.

Driver emotional responses to breaches of the informal rules/expectations were fairly consistent across the groups: Almost all drivers were angered to greater or lesser extent. Cognitively, it appears that breaches of informal rules encourage drivers to make attributions about the ‘offending’ driver, and these have moral overtones. Their reports of their behavioural responses varied widely, from momentary acknowledgement of their irritation and a conscious decision to avoid allowing it to affect their mood or driving, to instances of hostile or physical aggression or intimidation.

We wish to speculate further on the meaning of the findings from our analysis of the transcripts. We propose that driving etiquette and the related driver aggression is best understood in terms of a more longstanding challenge in human interaction – sharing social space with strangers. This shares Goffman’s (1963) approach to human behaviour in public places. Interestingly, in one of the few studies identified where sharing of space has been addressed in the transport setting (Mattioli, 2014, in relation to public transport), the author argues that “the car is the polar opposite of public transport, as its semi-private space allows people to avoid any interaction with strangers during travel” (Mattioli, 2014:58). Our focus group transcripts clearly indicate that this is a fundamental misperception of the nature of interaction between motorists in vehicles. As we have previously argued (Smyth and King, 2006), the driver-car assembly functions as a social being, with the vehicle being an extension of the self.

Figure 1 presents an explanatory framework for the complex of informal rules and behavioural responses that underpin driving etiquette.

Figure 1. Explanatory framework: setting, signalling, policing informal rules of driving etiquette



The basic premise behind the framework is that driving on the road involves sharing a social space. We share the road for mutual advantage in terms of mobility and to achieve a range of goals. We have formal rules which apply at all times in the same way, and should be understood by all. At the same time we need informal rules to cope with situations where the formal rules do not offer much help, such as a congested merging situation (Jonasson, 1999). It would therefore be expected that we would have evolved protocols that are informal to be used in this social space (driving etiquette), and that might be dependent on the micro-context, that need to be signalled as mutually understood, and that need to be policed informally. As a corollary, we would expect that perceived transgression and attempted policing could escalate on occasion to contested understanding,

altercations between drivers, or even interpersonal violence. We can interpret statements from our participants in relation to acknowledgement and responses to breaches of informal rules as evidence of this.

As noted earlier, an interesting question relates to how the informal rules that comprise driving etiquette evolve. While the framework does not address this, it indicates how a driver's understanding of driving etiquette might be reinforced or weakened by the feedback received from other drivers. The framework assumes the informal rules are communicated between drivers through their actions, and are policed in the same way, although there are likely to be mechanisms for these purposes outside the driving situation. Another important but rarely acknowledged question relates to how drivers indicate to other drivers that they understand the requirements of driving etiquette – after all, a driver is less able to communicate with words, gestures and facial expressions than a person who is not in a car. Our respondents noted that some common physical gestures (the wave) can be used for positive communication, while the car itself affords other types of signalling for the driver-car assembly ranging from less aggressive (flash headlights, short horn operation) to more aggressive (tailgating, prolonged horn operation) actions.

This framework provides opportunities for undertaking quantitative research to explore the development and use of driving etiquette, which can provide an understanding of 'normal' driving and its relation to aggressive driving. A limitation of the study is that it relies on a moderate-sized sample and is qualitative in nature. However this is considered appropriate as a first step towards a more structured, hypothesis-driven research approach.

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of focus group transcripts aimed at understanding driving etiquette and its relation to driver interactions, we have proposed a framework to explain how drivers share the social space of the road with strangers. To achieve successful sharing, several elements are required. First, there must be some kind of protocol or etiquette about how people interact with each other. This is not arrived at by decree, because no one is in charge outside of the formal framework of legislation; instead, it evolves from interactions and emerges as a rough set of rules understood in different ways by different people. It is also dependent on the micro-context, e.g. the etiquette that applies in daytime peak traffic may not be the same as the etiquette that applies in the early hours of the morning when traffic is very light. Second, there must be a way of indicating mutual understanding of the etiquette. Third, there must be a way of policing violations of etiquette in a way which restores calm rather than escalating tension. This involves both mechanisms for indicating annoyance with a perceived transgressor and those that allow apology for 'bad manners' or mistakes, which when used, allow mutual acknowledgement that a lesson in etiquette has been learned or accepted. We recognise that the framework and our interpretation of the material in the driver discussions is somewhat speculative in nature, and we offer it as a starting point for further exploration. It may be that the value of elaborating the framework is in its application to assisting drivers to better manage their perceptions, judgements, and attributions during interactions with others, to reduce the possibility of tension or conflict between drivers, especially in non-regulated or ambiguous situations.

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