

Practical Driving Test Anxiety:

Analysis and treatment of the phenomenon. A proposal

Paolo Perego^b, Cecilia Fiocchi^a, Federica Biassoni^b

^aWellbeing Psychology Graduate, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

^bTraffic Psychology Research Unit, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

Abstract

People taking the practical driving test, often cope with a big amount of anxiety, which could have negative effects on their performance during the task. The present work shows the results of a training conducted at a driving school involving candidates to the practical driving test, in order to reduce their anxiety level. The training is composed by cognitive and emotion regulation tasks and activities. The preliminary data analysis suggests that, on a short term, the training was effective in reducing the anxiety. Further research is required for looking into the long term effectiveness.

Background, Method, Results and Conclusions

Getting the driving license is on the one hand a very important event for young people, since it provides more independence and autonomy (Barkley & Cox, 2007). On the other hand, driving is a complex activity, since the surrounding environment is very unpredictable and out of control (Jian-you et al., 2013). Furthermore driving involves a huge number of different physical skills (coordination, speed perception, movements, different senses) and cognitive skills (attention, perception, automatism, intention reading, memory, decision making) (Mazer, Gelinas & Benoit, 2004). Therefore, people could feel anxious before their driving test. This feeling is called “performance anxiety”, a state of tension and fear felt when someone has to face an evaluative situation (Spielberger, 1972). Based on the assumption that emotions could influence cognitive processes (Lazarus, 1991), anxiety can have negative effects on people’s behaviour during a demanding task (Onyekuru & Ibegbunam, 2014), for instance deeply influencing the cognitive performance. That is why performance anxiety is proved to affect the driving behaviour. In order to reduce performance anxiety and increase the wellbeing perception during the period of exam preparation, and therefore optimizing the performance during the test, a training, composed of 9 cognitive and emotion-regulation tasks, has been created. The tasks were aimed firstly at increasing the participants’ self-confidence and self-efficacy perception, thanks to an increased awareness of their own abilities. Secondly, the purpose of the training was to increase the ability to focus attention and to reduce distraction during the driving task, by learning how to reduce negative thoughts linked to the exam. Finally, one activity was aimed at practicing physical relaxation and at learning the ability to manage the arousal generated by anxiety. 28 students, whose exam anxiety was previously assessed resulting significant, aged between 18 and 22 years, were divided into two groups. The experimental group participants (n.14) attended a 2 hours training at their driving school. The STAI Questionnaire (Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, & Jacobs, 1983; Pedrabissi & Santinello, 1989) was used to assess the participants’ anxiety level before the training, just after the training, and on the day when they performed the exam. Results show that for the experimental group participants, the average anxiety level after the training was significantly lower than before the training (t-test was performed: $T1=19,031$; $T2=17,673$; $df=13$, $p<0,05$). Moreover, the experimental group anxiety level measured on the day of the exam, proved to be lower than the control group one, though the difference was not statistically significant. These results show that the training is effective in reducing anxiety in a short term period, while a long term effectiveness and the actual influence on driving behavior needs further research to be verified.

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