

# The psychology of youth driving

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# Social cognition

- Social cognition concerns how we think about ourselves and others, and how others influence the way we think.
- Human behaviour is deeply influenced by social cognition

# Young people and social cognition

- Less established patterns of behaviour and identities (ways of thinking about ourselves and our place in the world).
- So more readily influenced by shifts in social context
- More open, dynamic social context – dangers and opportunities

# Social cognition and young drivers

- How do young drivers think about themselves?
- How do they think about others (their peers)?
- How are they influenced by others, including wider cultural messages?

**Study one**

**Optimism in young drivers**

# Above average effect (Optimism bias)

The tendency of people to consider themselves better than others (or at less risk of a negative outcome).

# Why this effect matters

- Optimism can have positive effects in terms of happiness and persistence at tasks
- Optimism can have negative effects in terms of complacency and risk-taking

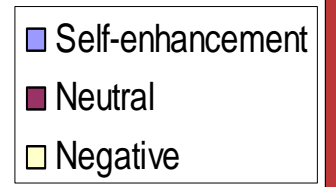
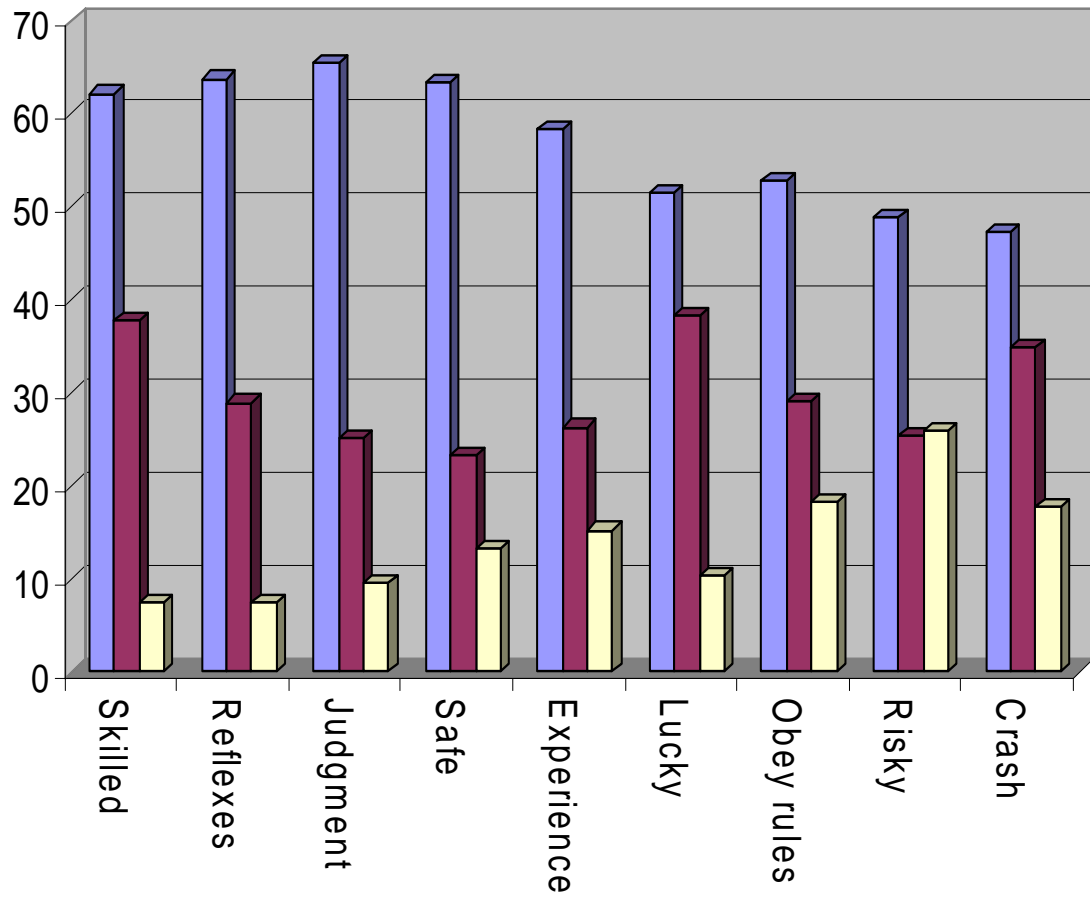
# **Driving study with technical institute students to measure the optimism bias**

(Foster & Harré)

# Questionnaire

Asked to rate themselves, relative to others of their age and sex

Items asked about likelihood of being involved in a crash, driving habits and abilities e.g. skill, experience, risky, and luck



# Item clusters (factors)

The items tended to cluster together into two groups, indicating different patterns in perceived superiority

**Driving ability** – some people rated themselves as superior in driving ability – judgment, reflexes, skills and experience

**Driving caution** – some people rated themselves as superior in driving caution – (not) being as risky, obey rules, safe

- Men showed more self-enhancement on driving ability
- Women showed more self-enhancement on driving caution

# Traffic advertisements study with stage 1 psychology students

(O'Neill & Harré)

# Two conditions

- Watched anti-drinking and driving advertisements showing either risky behaviour and a negative outcome (crash), or safe behaviour and a positive outcome.
- Then filled in the driving-optimism questionnaire

- A comparison was made between the 'risky' group and the 'safe' group on their responses to the 'driving ability' items and the 'driving caution' items.
- The risky group showed significant self-enhancement relative to the safe group on the ability but not the caution items.

- This suggests that the young people watching may have seen the ads in which someone loses control of the car after drinking as a failure of skill, judged this as something they wouldn't do, and so become even more self-enhancing on this dimension.

“What an idiot for losing control, I wouldn't do that if I was drunk, I really am able to handle a car a lot better than other drivers my age”.

# Why is being skilled so important to young (male) drivers?

Because driving fast and being able to handle a car is fun (probably not modifiable).

Because we live in a society that thinks men should be able to handle a car, even in adverse conditions (probably modifiable).

# Key implication

- Do not rely on examples of driving that could be interpreted as a failure of skill to change young people's attitudes.

## **Study two**

**Why I am in a hurry and you  
show off**

# Attribution theory

This suggests that we interpret the same behaviour differently depending on whether it is done by ourselves or someone else.

# Study of young drivers' attributions

Study of young drivers' attributions for why they and their friends take risks when driving.

## **Questionnaire asked:**

Do you ever take risks when you are driving? Why do you take risks?

Do your friends ever take risks when driving? Why do they take risks?

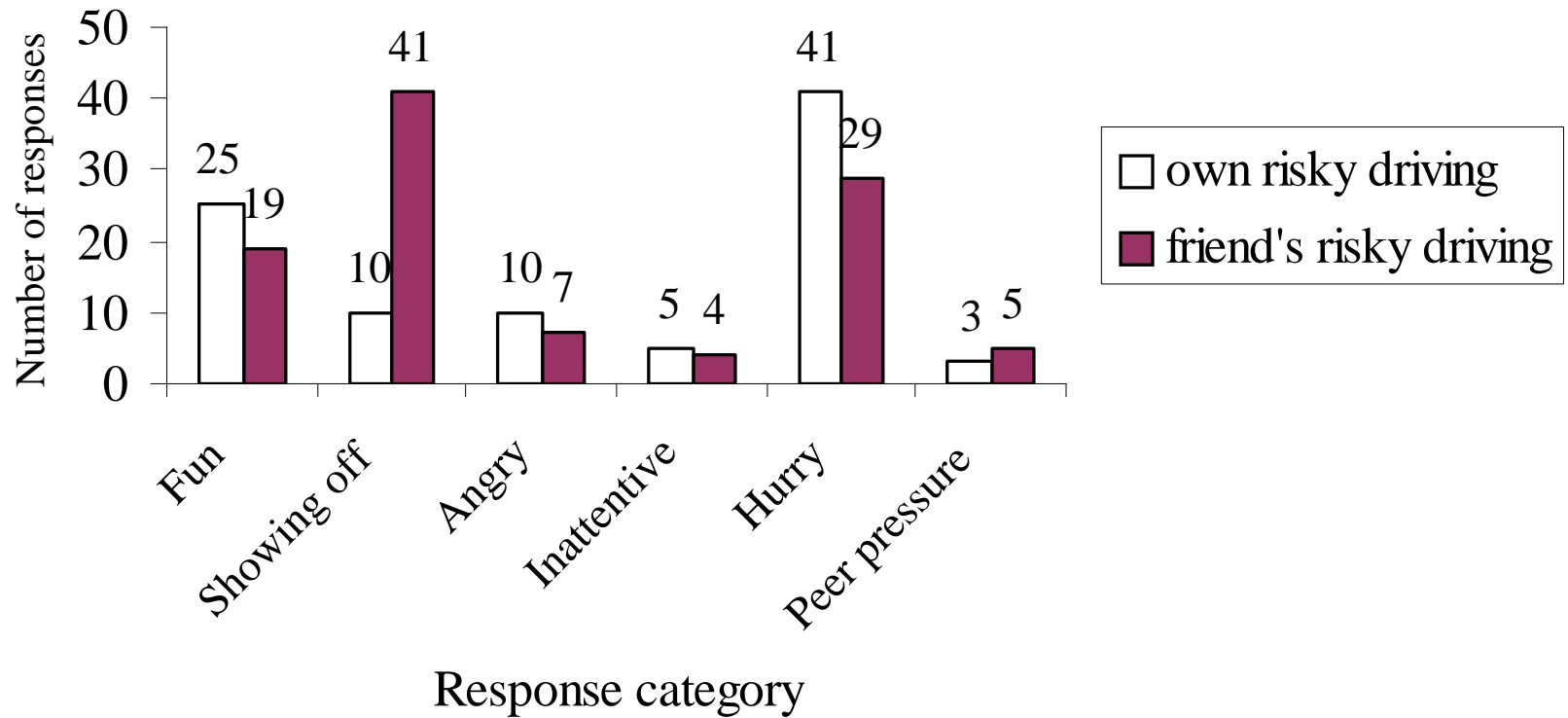
# Rating of risk taking

Scale 1-5 (never – all the time)

Mean for self                      2.69

Mean for friends                    3.03

**Figure 1: Attributions for own and friends' risky driving**



Or in other words, 'I get in a hurry (and have fun) but my friends like to show-off'.

Suggests that:

'Having fun' and 'showing off' are likely to be the same behaviour viewed from different perspectives

Young people may not be aware of the social contexts that encourage them to take risks.

# Social cognition and young drivers

- How do young drivers think about themselves?
- How do they think about others?
- How are they influenced by others, including wider cultural messages?

# How do young drivers think about themselves?

As skilled, cautious drivers who sometimes get in a hurry, and like to have fun.

# How do they think about others (their peers)?

- Having a tendency to show-off and take risks, without necessarily being skilled enough to get away with it.

# How are they influenced by others, including wider cultural messages?

- Wider cultural messages probably reinforce these perspectives, and ensure that being able to handle a car is still a key rite of passage to manhood.

# Key thoughts for interventions

- Do not assume that young people automatically identify with a protagonist that is like them.
- Young people (and old people too!) are drawn towards the 'cool' and try and avoid the 'uncool'

# Cool

Being able to handle a car

Some battle scars

Some risk-taking

Being in control

Successful people

Protecting your friends

Protecting children

*Fun, friends and status*

# Uncool

Showing off

Being unable to handle a car

Letting your friends down

Risking the lives of children

# Promote things that are 'cool' and consistent with safe driving

- Responsible driving is matched with having fun, having friends, having status
- e.g. Successful people who are responsible drivers. Be VERY wary of people who are 'reformed' responsible drivers

**Ignore things that are 'cool' and consistent with unsafe driving (why it may be safer to ignore than to punish)**

- e.g. Should we be talking about boy racer problem? What does this kind of talk do?

# Highlight 'uncool' things that are consistent with unsafe driving

- e.g. Shifting cultural messages and conversations about speeding and other kinds of reckless driving to being about:
  - Social isolation (the opposite to having fun, friends and status)
  - Risking your friends' lives
  - Risking a child's life(Because risking your own life is kind of cool)

# Shift youth driving culture to expand the range of safe driving practices that are 'cool'

- e.g. Promote the message "real men (and women) take responsibility for others"
- e.g. Use strategies to get young people behaving safely, then encourage a culture to develop around these (teaching traffic safety to younger children)

# References

- 2005 HARRE, N., FOSTER, S., & O'NEILL, M. Self enhancement, crash-risk optimism and the impact of safety advertisements on young drivers. *British Journal of Psychology*, 96, 215-230.
- 2004 HARRÉ, N., BRANDT, T., & HOUKAMAU, C. 'Young drivers' attributions for their own and their friends' risky driving.' *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 34 (4), 806-824