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The Young Driver: A Highway Warrior?

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ABSTRACT

Young drivers have high rates of injury in New Zealand and throughout the Western world. It is commonly perceived that a major reason for this is their tendency to engage in unsafe driving behaviours, something that has frequently been labelled "risk taking". A study of the literature suggested that the term "risk taking" has been used in a variety of different ways and may have obscured our understanding of young people's motives. Theories and research reviewed on the causes of unsafe driving behaviour amongst adolescents revealed a variety of potential contributors, ranging from the individual to the social. There is little evidence to implicate young women as unsafe drivers, who are most at risk as passengers.

A survey of sixth form students ($n = 626$) found high levels of unlicensed driving, breaking the rules associated with a restricted licence, failing to wear a seat belt in the back seat, speeding and being the passenger of a drinking driver. In addition, the survey found significantly more males than females reported: driving, engaging in unsafe driving behaviours, drinking and driving, speeding on the open road, breaking the night curfew associated with being on a restricted licence and dangerous thought patterns. Females were more likely to have been the passenger of a drinking driver after the last party they attended.

Interviews with a sub-sample of those surveyed ($n = 16$) revealed a number of scenarios that led to unsafe driving. These included: peer group dynamics, the adolescent sub-culture, emotional stress, an apparent lack of awareness of risk, and practical considerations. The interviews also indicated a lack of policing of the rules associated with the Graduated Driver Licensing System (G.D.L.S.).

Interventions aimed at changing the behaviour of young drivers are examined and driver education is looked at in some detail. Problems with methodology made it difficult to reach clear conclusions about the efficacy of past programmes. Health education literature was analysed to ascertain what may be the ingredients of effective programmes for driving safety.

An intervention study was carried out that compared a group of sixth form students who received a programme for driving safety ($n = 176$) with a control group ($n = 146$). Measures of attitudes, knowledge and self-reported behaviours yielded no significant differences between the two groups in either the post-test or the follow-up. A variety of possible reasons for this outcome are put forward, including the programme's emphasis on thinking processes and its low fear approach.

The recommendations that are made for decreasing the teenage road injury rate include: better policing of the G.D.L.S., education programmes and media campaigns that focus on the young male's sense of personal immunity from risk, and increased availability of safe transport on occasions when young people are drinking. It is stressed that comprehensive safety plans that target all age groups are likely to have the greatest impact.

Highway Warriors
by Shona Laing

I can't look
At the road rising on highway one
Where the tears of the tangi go on and on
A pagan power
United now
Christmas has gone

But you can see
Along the hard shoulder where the shrines should be
Where a soul departed the flower of a memory
An empty stretch
Where bone and flesh
Met with machine

And in the war of the road
Another beautiful young man dies
Innocent strangers
Another woman another child
Drive into danger
Out of an ordinary day
While the highway warriors
Wait in the passing lane

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
<i>The "young driver problem"</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Objectives of this thesis</i>	<i>3</i>
THE YOUNG DRIVER: A HIGHWAY WARRIOR?	6
CHAPTER 1 - EXPOSURE, INEXPERIENCE OR "RISK TAKING"?	7
<i>Exposure</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Inexperience</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>The integration of exposure, inexperience and "risk taking"</i>	<i>15</i>
CHAPTER 2 - "RISK TAKING": A DECONSTRUCTION	17
<i>A question of semantics or a question of motivation?</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Clarifying the semantics</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Approaches to the motivation question</i>	<i>23</i>
CHAPTER 3 - WHO ARE THE UNSAFE DRIVERS?	25
<i>Do young people engage in more unsafe driving behaviour?</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Is there a sub-group of young drivers who are mainly responsible for the "young driver problem"?</i>	<i>27</i>
CHAPTER 4 - AN EXAMINATION OF THE CAUSES OF ADOLESCENT UNSAFE DRIVING BEHAVIOUR	33
<i>Young drivers' attitudes and explanations</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Risk homeostasis theory</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Risk perception</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>The developmental phase of adolescence</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Alcohol</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>The role of society</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>Conclusions: what is going on when young people engage in risk behaviour?</i>	<i>63</i>
CHAPTER 5 - INTERVIEWS WITH YOUNG DRIVERS	67
<i>Aims and rationale</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>Participants</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>Procedure</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>Interview extracts and discussion</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Summary and recommendations</i>	<i>79</i>
CHANGING THE YOUNG DRIVER: EDUCATING FOR SAFETY	83
CHAPTER 6 - APPROACHES TO INTERVENTION	84
<i>Safety plans</i>	<i>84</i>
<i>Restrictions on young drivers</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>Greater enforcement of traffic laws</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>Media campaigns</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>Driver rehabilitation programmes</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>Driver education</i>	<i>90</i>
CHAPTER 7 - SCHOOL-BASED DRIVER EDUCATION	92
<i>Driver training programmes</i>	<i>92</i>
<i>Classroom-based education programmes</i>	<i>95</i>

CHAPTER 8 - MAKING DRIVER EDUCATION WORK:	
THEORETICAL INPUTS	104
<i>The profile of the "safe" young driver</i>	104
<i>The content of programmes</i>	107
<i>Effective methods of delivery</i>	111
<i>Timing</i>	115
<i>Recommendations</i>	116
THE QUESTIONNAIRE STUDIES	118
CHAPTER 9 - BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR STUDIES	119
<i>Descriptive study: background and rationale</i>	119
<i>Intervention study: background and rationale</i>	120
CHAPTER 10 - METHOD.....	124
<i>Subjects and sampling</i>	124
<i>Procedure</i>	125
<i>Description of questionnaires</i>	127
CHAPTER 11 - DESCRIPTIVE STUDY: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	133
<i>Results</i>	133
<i>Discussion</i>	141
CHAPTER 12 - INTERVENTION STUDY: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	145
<i>Results</i>	145
<i>Discussion</i>	154
GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	165
APPENDICES.....	171
REFERENCES	198

List of Tables

TABLE 1 - NUMBER OF SUBJECTS FOR EACH QUESTIONNAIRE.....	125
TABLE 2 - CRONBACH'S COEFFICIENT ALPHAS FOR THE SUBSCALES ON THE DANGEROUS THOUGHT PATTERNS SCALE	130
TABLE 3 - SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS: DESCRIPTIVE STUDY	133
TABLE 4 - DRIVING STATUS OF SAMPLE: DESCRIPTIVE STUDY	134
TABLE 5 - ATTITUDES TOWARDS DRINKING AND DRIVING	135
TABLE 6 - STRATEGIES FOR GETTING HOME AFTER DRINKING	136
TABLE 7 - DRINKING DRIVERS WHOM THE SUBJECTS HAD BEEN DRIVEN BY	138
TABLE 8 - FASTEST SPEEDS DRIVEN	138
TABLE 9 - BREAKING THE RULES ASSOCIATED WITH RESTRICTED LICENCES	140
TABLE 10 - THE DANGEROUS THOUGHT PATTERNS SCALE.....	140
TABLE 11 - SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS: INTERVENTION STUDY	145
TABLE 12 - DRIVING STATUS OF SAMPLE: INTERVENTION STUDY	146
TABLE 13 - UNIVARIATE ANALYSIS RESULTS FOR POST-TEST: ALL SUBJECTS ITEMS ...	148
TABLE 14 - UNIVARIATE ANALYSIS RESULTS FOR POST-TEST: DRIVER ONLY ITEMS....	149
TABLE 15 - UNIVARIATE ANALYSIS RESULTS FOR FOLLOW-UP: ALL SUBJECTS ITEMS .	150
TABLE 16 - UNIVARIATE ANALYSIS RESULTS FOR FOLLOW-UP: DRIVER ONLY ITEMS .	152
TABLE 17 - UNIVARIATE ANALYSIS RESULTS FOR FOLLOW-UP: NON-DRIVER ITEM	153

List of Appendices

APPENDIX A - INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR PARENTS.....	172
APPENDIX B - CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE PROGRAMME EVALUATION	173
APPENDIX C - CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE INTERVIEWS	174
APPENDIX D - INTERVIEWS: SET 1	175
APPENDIX E - INTERVIEWS: SET 2	176
APPENDIX F - PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRES	177
APPENDIX G - QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CONTACT TEACHERS.....	196
APPENDIX H - QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEACHERS OF THE PROGRAMME.....	197