Safer Driving through Reflective Thinking: the need for a cultural approach which deals with attitudes, beliefs and expectations

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Abstract
The paper considers aspects of driving which are less often considered but increasingly appearing in literature. It looks at the focus on skill which has dominated approaches to dealing with driving behaviour and then goes on to discuss some of the other aspects of driving behaviour and what is involved in the thinking related to driving. Finally the paper argues that there are many aspects of driving which need to be considered in a reflective inquiry mode through group interaction.

Skill Focus

There is currently a lot of international agreement amongst those researching in the area of road safety that the sorts of methods that have been tried in the past are limited in their effectiveness. Attempts to deal with and improve road safety can be considered to have fallen into two broad categories—the environment and behaviour.

The environment approach deals with the standard of roads and other features of the traffic environment. There have been some obvious developments and benefits in this area such as the building of better roads, improving the safety features of vehicles, compulsory seat belt wearing and so on. These sorts of developments can only go so far, however.

Another feature of the environment is police presence and the use of speed cameras and random breath testing. Clearly, these initiatives have also made a difference, but again it is limited. The police cannot be everywhere all the time. When the police focus on a particular area they find that the traffic slows down and behaviour improves. As soon as the

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police presence is removed however, behaviours revert very quickly to their previous forms.

The major area of concern remains the driver and this is also seen as the most difficult aspect of road safety to deal with. The behaviour approach has tended overwhelmingly to focus on driving skill. Researchers have noted, however, that driver behaviour does not change substantially through skill based training. The training often focuses on dealing with sudden and dangerous situations which drivers find in their experience rarely occur. Drivers who tend to take risks, 'come to realise that illegal or risky behaviours do not necessarily lead to crashes'(Watson, 199?)

As Watson notes, crashes are relatively rare events so that emergency procedures are not practised. Drivers who are trained in emergency control procedures subsequently revert to their pre-training behaviours when faced with an emergency. Driving skill, it is concluded, is difficult to modify in a lasting way.

In addition, a focus on skill does not deal with the fact that people choose to speed regularly, to tailgate others and engage in other risky behaviours, for a range of reasons which need to be examined. Figures from the NSW Police indicate that the number of speeding fines is increasing from year to year. Whether this is because there are more infringements or the police are finding better ways to catch offenders is unclear. However, due to the fact that large numbers of offenders do go under detected, it does indicate that many are prepared to speed regularly and there appears to be little real questioning of this kind of behaviour or consideration of its possible consequences.

A number of researchers are now noting the short lived nature of skill based driver awareness campaigns. (Barry Watson, 199?, FORS Report, 1994). Further it does not appear that inadequate vehicle handling skills is the major cause of road accidents (Christie, 1995). As Watson states; 'the emphasis on practical driving skills ignores the powerful influence that motivational and attitudinal factors can exert on driver behaviour.'

Watson recommends, along with a number of other researchers (he

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cites, Job, 1995, Christie, 1995 and Watson, et al., 1996 among others) that driver training should focus more on addressing 'the wide range of perceptual, cognitive, motivational and attitudinal factors which influence driver judgment and decision-making'.

It has been noted since the 70s that ability is relatively unimportant 'compared with motivation in determining safer driving behaviour' (Saffron, 1982, Naatanen and Summala, 1976). Choices that drivers make have more influence on safety than actual skill in handling difficulties. The choice to overtake on double lines or to maintain high speeds rather than leave a more desirable margin for safety have a great impact on the difficulties likely to occur. Driving behaviour of this sort is considered to be a frequent cause of traffic accidents (Saffron, 1982).

In line with such a focus on skill many drivers also regard skill as the most important feature of driving, particularly males who feel that they are 'good' drivers and therefore should be able to determine for themselves what speed they wish to travel at rather than have it decided for them. By 'good' driver what is often meant is ability to handle a vehicle, although there is increasing attention on other aspects of the driving environment such as traffic and the need to be patient, aware of what is going on and consideration of others. Males who have been driving for 20 years or more tend to regard skill as the most important factor (SMH, Letters to the Editor) and this is the area where they see themselves as superior to women. Even young males appear to maintain a consensus that women are just not as good at handling a vehicle (RTA 2000).

The main point is that while skill development does not produce lasting reductions in road crash rates many in the driving community regard skill as the most important feature of the driving experience.

Aspects of Driving Behaviour

The sorts of factors in driving behaviour that need to become the focus of attention are other aspects of the driving environment as well as the attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and expectations which inform responses to these. A number of researchers have noted the need to consider and deal with the attitudes and beliefs which bring about or are behind less

safe driving practices (Saffron, 1982, Parker et al., 1996). Saffron suggests that changing the behaviour of the ordinary driver involves a need to change societal attitudes overall.

There is a need to develop a 'road etiquette' which clearly delineates the kinds of behaviours that are appropriate in handling a motor vehicle on public roads and which is related directly to people's needs and expectations. This will involve confronting social beliefs, attitudes and expectations—the kinds of beliefs etc. we have as a society about road travel, and also as individuals. While there is likely to be a range of individual attitudes and expectations, these will operate within fairly limited terms determined by the social/cultural environment.

A range of social and individual beliefs operate in relation to our thinking when driving, to construct the whole driving experience. Our social beliefs are largely unexplored and therefore little attention is paid to them. How do we regard the experience of driving as a society? What views do we have about the public nature of the driving experience? Do we regard the roads as available to us in a privileged sense—we have a right to use the roads, what does that imply? We have certain expectations about roads and traffic and how it should operate. We see new roads being built all the time and we seem to have built up the idea that because of all the developments driving should be a relaxed, easy experience. Instead it is often a complicated, confusing, crowded and frustrating experience.

Recent (July 2000) questions around making it quicker and easier to pay tolls at booths in Sydney no doubt raise the expectation that traffic congestion will be considerably reduced with a new system. Naturally there will be some benefits but overall traffic congestion will continue to be a problem, particularly at peak hours. The fact is traffic flow is very heavy and there are limited ways in which it can be dealt with. Drivers will continue to be stressed as they deal with the morning and evening rush and we focus very little attention on how to make that more humanly manageable.

Clearly more legislation is not the answer, nor is increasing fines—many people believe there is little chance of being caught and experience has

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shown this to be the case. What is needed is a way of getting people to take more responsibility for what is occurring on the roads, how certain sorts of behaviours contribute to that and what sorts of behaviours will make it a much easier and safer experience for everyone.

Driving, cars, roads and traffic flows have all developed at an incredible rate in the last century and we have taken little opportunity to reassess the way our thinking and behaving in relation to it has kept up.

The Thinking Side of Perception

How people think when in control of a motor vehicle has not been considered a great deal. The extent to which cognitive processing or reflective thinking, is required in perception and other aspects of making judgments based on perceptual information, particularly in complex situations, is not clearly understood. The ways in which attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and expectations interact with perceptual information is itself complex and probably impossible to isolate.

Parker et al. note a number of aspects such as drivers' views/perceptions that powerful cars make it difficult to keep to the speed limit, especially in suburban areas where the speed limit is low. The driver is able to excuse their behaviour by maintaining the idea in their own minds that the car is in control. When this kind of thinking is brought out and considered, it is difficult for the driver to deny that in fact they are in control of the vehicle.

Other kinds of thinking have to do with the expectation that we can get in our cars and drive along the roads unobstructed until we reach our destinations. Of course this rarely occurs in practice. Driving involves dealing with a host of extraneous influences which we must take into account, negotiate and so on. The idea that 'it shouldn't be like that' (there shouldn't be kids running across roads or people not knowing where they are going or trying to find somewhere to park and so on) can lead to a lot of frustration when the reality is that it is like that a lot of the time.

There are a number of factors involved in the over representation of young inexperienced drivers in road crashes. Evidence suggests that in

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young drivers there is an over-reliance on formal rules or laws (FORS, 1996) resulting in these drivers being less able to 'appreciate and allow for the fact that others do not always obey rules and behave in expected ways'. Thus in some cases crashes involve another driver ignoring a rule or making an error. Younger drivers fail to make sufficient allowance for errors or infringements. This is attributed first of all to a lack of perceptual schemata on which to base judgments of hazard or risk, but it is also regarded that this factor interacts with other motivational factors which bring about greater risk taking behaviours amongst younger drivers (FORS Report, 1994).

The fact that younger drivers tend to drive too fast and to drive too close to other vehicles contributes substantially to their involvement in crashes. However, the fact that they also see many people driving in this manner indicates that driver behaviour overall needs to be examined to reduce the effect on young drivers. There needs to be some focus on increasing responsible driving in all drivers as well as impressing on young people in particular that it is safer to drive within speed limits and a safe distance from the vehicle in front, for example.

Development of Thinking

Little is known of the actual cognitive demands involved in driving. It is not merely what we are able to perceive but what information we pay attention to, how we assess the information we are receiving and what judgments we make on the basis of it. In addition, our perceptions and judgments are heavily influenced by a set of social beliefs and values as well as assumptions, attitudes and expectations which govern how we function and what we are able to integrate into our thinking.

The sorts of motivational factors that may influence the driver are most likely in the background of the individual's thinking but may be exerting a strong effect on cognitive and perceptual processing as well as the way in which the driver approaches the task of driving.

It is important therefore, that these factors receive some attention at the learning stage and that young drivers learn ways of reflecting on and checking these aspects of driving behaviour which otherwise become

systematic along with the more technical elements of driving.

Thinking occurs in relation to others, a social environment, a social structure and world view. Seeing, hearing, taking in what is going on around us, occurs whether we are conscious of it or not. Taking in information with a view to **noticing** what is being transmitted and checking the interpretation of what is perceived is an important function in being aware of how we are operating in that context, as well as in highlighting important aspects of it. It helps us to avoid misinterpretations and to examine our relationship to the beliefs and values operating there.

It is necessary to create new modes of thinking in dealing with an increasingly complex and demanding environment. Seeing that there are other ways of thinking about/interpreting a situation leads to more options for dealing with what we are faced with. In order to see and use these however, we need to be able to examine the assumptions we start with and be able to draw connections.

Perhaps our thinking has not kept up with changes in the driving experience—better roads, faster more efficient and comfortable cars—what kinds of expectations result from these advances? At the same time as things improve, the roads have become more crowded and our lives place more time pressure on most of us. The demands on the driver are in many senses greater even though there have been many advancements.

There is currently no forum for confronting these kinds of difficulties or focusing on what role they are playing in the way we drive, and there has been little if any attention paid to these aspects of driving. The thinking involved in driving is not something that most people have learned to pay a great deal of attention to. Developing reflective thinking and awareness leads to greater responsibility for self and consideration of others.

Philosophical Inquiry

Philosophical inquiry is a process designed to produce greater use of thinking skills which enable reflection on the assumed or less obvious

aspects of everyday thinking. By drawing out major assumptions, concepts and beliefs, the inquiry process aids in evaluation and analysis, consideration of consequences and connections and other relevant aspects of judgment and information processing. In using a community of inquiry as a forum for developing reflective skill in relation to particular contexts, driving in this case, and to assess the virtues and merits of legal and other aspects of driving, participants are more likely to be able to relate to and take on for themselves, those aspects of driving. One of the reasons for this is that participants learn how to apply their thinking more appropriately to understanding concepts, analysing, seeing connections and so on. They develop reflective awareness and learn to pay closer attention to different elements of it.

The 'community of inquiry' is an idea that originates with John Dewey and has been developed into the Philosophy for Children program which uses the method of philosophical inquiry in creating a community of inquiry. Matthew Lippman (1985), one of the authors of the Philosophy for Children curriculum, argues that in order to develop individual thinking skills and employ them in a coordinated fashion it is important to develop certain 'cognitive dispositions'. With the employment of the community of inquiry in learning contexts, Lippman states that cognitive dispositions emerge such as; 'care for the procedures of inquiry, a considerateness of others' points of view, and a readiness to apply the same critical spirit to oneself as one does to others, that is, to be self-appraising as well as appraising of one's peers.' These cognitive dispositions, Lippman suggests, motivate individuals to 'mobilise their (thinking) skills effectively'.

Encouraging reflective thinking on these sorts of areas should build into the driver's awareness a process of constantly checking on focus/attention as well as motivational factors. A carefully guided questioning process in a group context leads participants into focusing on areas of their thinking they hadn't previously considered, to hearing the different views of others and how they understand and think about aspects of driving and to critically evaluating attitudes and beliefs, the resulting behaviours and their consequences.

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The Group Effect

Driving behaviour is strongly influenced by the attitudes of one's family, peers and other significant persons (Saffron, 1982, Parker et al., 1996). It is difficult for individuals to change their behaviour alone, thus there is a need to influence certain sorts of behaviours on a social level. For this reason, dealing with behaviour, beliefs and attitudes in a group context is important. If individuals can see that others just like them are also undergoing the same process they will have more courage to follow it through themselves. If the group itself works towards a framework of acceptable and appropriate behaviour they will be more likely to live by it than if it is imposed on them from elsewhere. The group has a strong social effect, and a well guided and facilitated process which encourages reflective thinking, analysis of implications and beliefs and works out an understanding and appropriate assessment of the context of public roads, can produce more lasting changes in behaviour.

An approach which emphasises self-assessment and reflection is far more satisfactory in a democratic society than one which relies solely on legal prohibitions.

Pratkanis and Turner (1996) in their paper 'Persuasion and Democracy: Strategies for Increasing Deliberative Participation and Enacting Social Change' discuss what they call 'deliberative persuasion' in which persuasion is regarded as 'an act of discovery—finding a course of action through deliberation, debate, discussion, argument, and analysis.' They state that, 'mutuality is essential because social change requires the actions and initiative of people from all walks of life'.

Involving people themselves in working out what makes a safe driving environment and looking at the main factors involved in that in a carefully facilitated process is likely to have a much deeper impact on thinking. Merely giving lectures or telling people in a range of ways is not sufficient to get attention and produce change. An interactive process, however is able to give people a more concrete connection to the concerns being considered and to reflect on these for themselves.

This has been shown to be effective in a study in Sweden (Gregerson, 1996) where group discussion proved to be the most effective of four

strategies in producing a change in accident rate over a two year period. The authors of the study cite a number of possible reasons for the benefits of group discussion. The first is based on Lewin's theory which links intention and behaviour through personal decision. The second draws on Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and their work on reasoned action in which the group norms are made more explicit allowing more positive intentions to be created.

Parker et al (1992 and 1995) have looked at the extended theory of reasoned action, the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985, 1988) and tested a third aspect of behavioural intention, perceived behavioural control, as a predictor of behavioural intentions and goal attainment. Recommendations (Parker et al. and Gregerson) in each case were that there is a need for further research and in the case of the Gregerson study, that the group decision process could productively be applied to young drivers.

The group then, is important, and combined with the use of the process of philosophical inquiry, becomes a very carefully structured environment designed to maximise the possibility for change through the productive involvement of the participant.

The Future

The consequences of not tackling these aspects of driving are of some concern. The rise in traffic infringements, continuing high rates of crashes and fatalities on the roads indicate that the directions research, police and media campaigns and so on have taken are not sufficient to deal with the problem. The high incidence of crashes involving young people is alarming. Many initiatives are underway but very few have involved any focus on the thinking and related behavioural aspects of driving.

There is a need for some social awareness of attitudes, expectations, beliefs and assumptions and the role these play in the driving experience. This can be achieved by putting drivers through a facilitated process which enhances important aspects of thinking and brings into focus and questions some of the prevailing attitudes and beliefs. Carefully controlled media campaigns, informed by an understanding

of the more social and cultural aspects of driving behaviour can also aid a greater focus on thinking and bringing into focus appropriate attitudes and beliefs.

There is a need for an overall cultural change and reflection on our attitudes, expectations and beliefs of road use. Technology has brought about major changes in vehicles, roads and traffic management but drivers themselves, their expectations and attitudes, and the culture of driving, have received less attention. Drivers learn from other drivers and what they see going on around them. We need to create opportunities to **'stop and think'** about the purposes and practical implications of convenient, safe travel on our roads.

While we can make an impact on young drivers as they start to gather experience on the roads it is necessary also to relate their understandings to the broader community too and create expectations there about how people behave on the roads and how the issue of driving expectations, attitudes and beliefs can be dealt with. Laws are not enough. We need more appropriate ways to relate to the parameters the laws provide.

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