

Choosing not to speed: A qualitative exploration of differences in perceptions about speed limit compliance and related issues.

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Abstract

Speeding research indicates that many factors influence drivers' speed choice. Much of the speeding literature has focused on those who speed. This is understandable, given the significant contribution of speeding to road trauma. As a result, we have some understanding of the motivations of speeding offenders. However, we know little about those who choose not to speed. Increased knowledge about these drivers offers the potential for alternative perspectives on influential factors. This paper reports findings from a series of focus groups exploring the perceptions of 67 Queensland drivers, with special emphasis on drivers identifying as regularly speeding by large amounts, or as rarely speeding. Distinct differences between groups emerged. Rare Speeders reported making conscious choices about driving speeds based on a perceived legal/moral imperative and safety concerns. In contrast, Regular Speeders reported a lack of awareness of, or attention to, speed limits, appearing to base travel speeds on individual preference and convenience, rather than legal requirements. Perceptions of time-related pressures also differed. Rare Speeders described time-management strategies to negate the necessity for speed. For Regular Speeders, however, running late was prominent in justifications for speeding. Regular speeders described various strategies to avoid detection (e.g., camera site learning) and speeding-related penalties (e.g., fraudulent demerit point purchase, defiance of licence suspensions). These punishment avoidance experiences appear not to deter speeding, but to reinforce the perception that speeding is not dangerous and detection is far from certain. Overall, these results highlight areas for action in future research and policy development, as speed limit compliance remains high on the road safety agenda.

Introduction

Speeding remains high on the behaviour change priority list for road safety authorities as it is consistently identified as a major contributing factor to road trauma (Peden et al., 2004). To date, the majority of speeding research has investigated a large range of influential factors from the perspective of those who exceed speed limits. This focus is understandable, given that faster travel speeds increase both risk of crash involvement and severity of crash outcomes (Fildes, Langford, Andrea, & Scully, 2005). Despite this, our knowledge of the

factors that influence speeding drivers in the Australian context is incomplete (Hatfield & Job, 2006). Moreover, we have relatively little understanding of what influences drivers to choose not to speed (see Elliott, 2001).

The limited research on drivers who do not speed suggests they: are older and female, view speed limit compliance as a moral issue, and believe compliance is easy and common (Elliott, 2001; Silcock, Smith, Knox, & Beuret, 2000). In contrast, those driving at faster speeds are: more likely young and male, more comfortable at high speeds, less likely to see speeding as dangerous (Harrison, Fitzgerald, Pronk, & Fildes, 1998), less deterred by speed cameras, (Fylan, Hempel, Grunfeld, Connor, & Lawton, 2006), cite being in a hurry more often, believe speeding will get them to their destination more quickly, believe they have less control over their speed (Forward, 2006), are more focused on the driving task, experience time pressure when driving (McKenna, 2005), experience fewer punishments associated with speeding, and are more certain of being punished if apprehended (Fleiter & Watson, 2006). Together, these findings highlight themes associated with time, safety, control, and enforcement.

Enforcement remains an important tool in regulating driving behaviour, yet researchers disagree about how enforcement promotes compliance with road rules. Some argue that a desire to obey the law motivates compliance, others, that the desire to avoid punishment is a more likely explanation (Siegrist, 2004)¹. It is also suggested that compliance is more probable when drivers perceive as legitimate, the behaviour and its associated enforcement methods (McKenna, 2006). For speed enforcement, speed camera programs attract criticism because some view them as a means of revenue raising, rather than harm reduction (McKenna, 2006). Those who believe speeding is safe may not perceive laws governing driving speeds and associated enforcement methods as legitimate. Furthermore, our knowledge of the importance of these factors to drivers who do not intentionally speed is limited. Examining speeding from the perspective of such drivers may provide alternative insights into decisions regarding non-compliance.

This study formed part of a larger qualitative examination of factors influential on driving speed across various driver types. This paper reports only results relating to time, safety, control and enforcement, as discussed by drivers identifying as speeding rarely or regularly². Focus groups were used because they offer the opportunity, in a socially interactive setting,

¹ For some drivers, avoiding punishment may actually be more influential than punishment itself.

² Where relevant, statements from the other driver types in this study are included to demonstrate thematic divergence or congruence.

to gain multiple views on specific topics that could be clarified and challenged as discussions progressed (Morse & Field, 1995).

Method

Participants

Sixty-seven Queensland car drivers (Provisional and Open licence-holders) were recruited in 2006, ranging in age from 18-77 years. Recruitment strategies included advertising on public notice boards, accessing first-year psychology students, and snowballing (via acquaintances of the first author). Participants self-selected into one of eight categories based on age, gender, and speeding behaviour (see Appendix 1). Students ($n=34$) were offered course credit and community participants ($n=33$) were offered the chance to win a \$30 retail voucher.

Materials and Procedure

Participants provided written consent and demographic details: age, gender, speeding offences and crashes in the last 3 years, and number of licence suspensions/disqualifications. Focus group protocols were developed to elicit information about personal definitions of speeding, ease/difficulty of speed limit compliance, and influences on speed selection. The first author facilitated each group (60-90 minutes) and transcribed the audio-recorded conversations as soon as possible, allowing early analysis whilst data collection continued (Bloor & Wood, 2006). The relatively high level of community acceptance of speeding highlighted in previous Australian research suggested most people would not view speeding as a sensitive topic (Pennay, 2006). Thus, groups were intentionally structured to be homogeneous in nature to encourage discussion amongst drivers with similar beliefs.

Analysis

Using an interpretive framework, a thematic analysis was conducted, with emerging themes compared between groups (Sivesind, 1999). Specific probes were added to subsequent sessions if clarification/substantiation was required on particular themes. A constant comparative approach was employed to help validate the researchers' appreciation of issues as analysis proceeded (Rennie, 2006).

Results

Sample characteristics

Table 1 shows demographic details for the speed-related groups. Appendix 1 contains this information for all groups, ($N=67$).

Table 1

Demographic information for speed-related groups

Group	n	Mean Age	SD (years)	Age Range (years)
Speed Regularly (2 male, 10 female)	12	34.25	14.74	18-59
Speed Rarely (5 male, 5 female)	10	46.4	18.01	26-77

Offence data. Appendix 2 shows crash, offence, and licence sanction data for the speed-related groups as compared with the highest-risk driver group (young males). This data was collected to validate the self-selection process for group recruitment. Despite the small sample size, results suggest this was a successful strategy.

Thematic analysis. The identification of themes relates primarily to the discussions of the Speed Regularly and Rarely groups. Participants are identified according to driver group (e.g., RareM44 is a 44-year-old male identifying as rarely speeding; Female>50 is a female participant aged over 50). "Int:" indicates facilitator comments.

Themes

Definitions of speeding and attitudes towards exceeding the speed limit. Participants in all groups described speeding as driving at any speed over the posted limit. However, some drivers, especially Regular Speeders, after acknowledging this 'technical' definition, provided examples of personal definitions of acceptable driving speeds. This suggests that while they are aware of the illegal nature of speeding, the legal definition is not one they feel compelled to heed. For example:

"115 [km/hour] being the absolute minimum [before I consider it speeding]."

(RegularF19)

"Well I do any speed I want to do really, 'cause I drive so much. Sitting on 130 for me is nothing when I'm driving, you know, 20 hours at a time. I don't think that's speeding, really. (RegularM27)

"You have your own limits of course...you can certainly get up to 160." (RegularM54)

"I see it [speeding] as road management. I don't look at what speed I'm driving, I'm just going by instinct." (Male>50)

This could indicate that these drivers equate 'speeding' with dangerous driving, and, as they may not see themselves as dangerous drivers, do not therefore define their own behaviour as speeding. In contrast to the apparent disregard for speed limits described above, Rare Speeders gave safety-related responses indicating acknowledgement and acceptance of the

need for, and compliance with, legislated speed limits. For some, this seemed underpinned by a moral imperative to comply.

“...it’s a choice to be as safe as I can be.” (RareM39)

“It is always morally wrong [to speed] because you are risking your safety and others too.” (RareM47)

“I’m more influenced [to comply] by...internalizing what I know to be the right thing to do” (Female>50).

Such disparate responses suggest major differences regarding what the rule of law means to different people. Rare Speeders appear to have a strong moral imperative to comply with speed limits, coupled with the desire to remain safe. Conversely, Regular Speeders appear to base driving speeds on individual preference or convenience, rather than legal requirements, moral imperatives, or safety concerns. This suggests that they may not perceive speeding as a dangerous behaviour.

Ease of complying with speed limits

Consistent differences emerged between groups regarding ease of compliance with speed limits. Rare Speeders reported little or no difficulty adhering to limits. This appears linked to conscious efforts to obey the law.

“I just think that it is easy to not speed, it is easy for me to take the time, easy for me to decide that I will drive under the speed limit.” (RareF26)

“You just do it [comply] because you want to.” (RareM39)

In contrast, Regular Speeders reported difficulty complying with speed limits³. This appears linked to several things: a perceived incongruence between access to faster vehicles and ever-decreasing speed limits; the desire to not feel hemmed in by other traffic; and cognitive distractions.

“I find [complying] ridiculous...they’re making faster cars and they’re getting us to drive slower...that doesn’t make it easy.” (RegularF59)

“It’s about having your space around you...you speed because you want to get away [from drivers close behind]. Whether you’re gonna go 20 ks [over the limit]...you don’t really think about that.” (RegularF20)

“In business where you have to do a lot of thinking about your job, you hop in your car...use that time as thinking time.” (RegularM54)

³ The exception was 40 km/hour school zones, where, overall, there was consensus across groups about the necessity and relative ease of compliance in this slower zone.

An interesting distinction between groups relates to stress associated with speeding. For Rare Speeders, travelling at or under the limit contributes to stress-free travel:

“I...seem to be content...I know the limit, I set me thing [cruise control]...and I never worry about being over.” (RareM77)

“It [complying] just cuts all the stress out of driving.” (RareM33)

Conversely, Regular Speeders reported a rush of excitement (adrenaline) and stress-release associated with exceeding speed limits:

“I think it’s that adrenaline surge [that makes it hard to comply]. I feel so much better when I’m speeding.” (RegularF46)

“Part of it [speeding] is relaxation actually.” (RegularF59)

Further, some Regular Speeders’ responses indicate speed selection happens by default, with no conscious thought, suggesting a lack of regard for speed limits and a lack of importance placed on the driving task:

“You don’t have to use your brain to drive...it’s really just going on automatic.” (RegularF59)

“...you are just driving, to a degree, absent-mindedly. You can get up to 160 [km/hour] and not be aware of it.” (RegularM54).

“Actually, I’ll be honest, I’ve lived here 24 years and I don’t even know what the speed limit is out on our roads....I don’t even know what speed I drive, I just get in and drive.” (RegularF53)

“Once you know the street, you don’t bother [with speed limits]. I think, ‘oh stuff it, I’ll just drive at whatever’.” (RegularF20)

Time pressure

Time management emerged as an important distinguishing factor between the groups. Rare Speeders reported planning for potential delays and didn’t equate speeding with time-saving.

“I think it’s proactive to think ahead and try and plan for what might hold you up so you can still be in charge of the trip.” (RareM41)

“I plan so I’m not in a hurry, even in peak hour...speeding is so unnecessary.” (RareM33)

By contrast, running late was an oft-cited justification for speeding by Regular Speeders. Interestingly, there appears to be a sub-group for whom time pressure appears an ever-present issue, with an inference that they will arrive late if they don’t speed.

“Deep down, I’m trying to make up a little bit of time all the time, ‘cause I’m generally going to a meeting or something...you can get locked out if you’re late.” (RegularF53)
“You’ve got a party to get to...you’ve got 5 minutes, you’re running late, you’re going to speed...if you’re not organized enough, you end up speeding.” (RegularF20)
“The cars [on the highway] are consistently going at 120, so if you want to get somewhere [on time], you end up around 120 [km/hour in a 100 km/hour zone].”
(RegularF49)

Together, these distinctions indicate a difference in the way the groups attribute control over their speed. Rare Speeders describe themselves as having full control of their driving speed. However, Regular Speeders’ responses indicate more externally-related control mechanisms.

Avoiding detection and sanctions

When discussing influences on speed choice, Regular Speeders offered several strategies to avoid detection and sanctions. Firstly, many drivers reported site learning (i.e., familiarity with speed camera locations) and boasted about their ability to identify camera sites and police vehicles.

“I like to think that I know where their speeding things [cameras] are.” (RegularF59)

“I like to watch the roof of every car coming towards me...I can pick a cop car for miles” (RegularM54)

The ability to identify unmarked police vehicles seems a coveted skill amongst Regular Speeders, and a degree of resentment was expressed about covert policing.

“Driving on the highway I am [more careful] ‘cause of undercover cars, but you can pick what they are.” (RegularF19)

“I think it’s [speeding] a lot more stressful at night ‘cause usually in your rear mirror, you can work out whether it’s a cop car. At night they can hide.” (RegularF46)

Secondly, several groups described strategies for avoiding penalties once detected.

Fraudulent demerit point sharing to avoid licence loss was described in two forms.

Opportunistic points sharing is when a family member with ample demerit points declares they were driving at the time of the offence, thus receiving the penalty. Some described this practice as commonplace.

“Mum’s done it [declared she was driving] for me.” (RegularM27)

“My best friend has had multiple fines and both her parents have taken fines for her.”
(Female <25)

“It goes on all the time. I’ve talked to all the blokes at work, lots of them do it for their family....they’ve always got people taking points for them.” (Male>50)

The second form of demerit point sharing seems more systematic, as points are exchanged for cash from non-family members.

“I know one bloke who does it...a young girl he bought his off. She lives in the city, in peak hour traffic, you’re never going to get done [booked for speeding]...another bloke, he pays, like if someone’s got 12 points, and he gets a speeding fine, he’ll say, ‘I’ll give [money in exchange for your points].” (RegularM27)

“...my [relative]...buys points off people so he can keep driving. He gets them off other people for [\$X] a point. My son’s got a friend they call the Points Man ‘cause he never speeds, so he just takes everyone’s tickets and gets \$X for every point”.
(Female>50)

Two other examples of avoiding punishment were mentioned. One involved work-related driving and speed camera offences. A company can accept a higher monetary fine by not nominating the driver of the vehicle at the time of the offence.

“If they [company] pay triple the fine, they [driver] don’t lose any points...the company pays the money if you don’t put down who was driving.” (RegularM27)

This driver interpreted the provision for this practice as evidence of government revenue raising, not harm minimisation:

“the Transport Department or Queensland Government [say], ‘we don’t really care if you’re speeding or not, just give us \$450 bucks and we’ll turn a blind eye to it’.”
(RegularM27)

Another strategy used to avoid punishment associated with speeding (e.g., licence loss) was to willingly ignore the sanction.

“I did 3 months without a licence, ‘cause I lost my licence [due to speeding]. [My options were to have] one point for 12 months or lose it [licence] for 3 [months] and get your whole 12 [points] back [at the end of 3 months].” Int: “How did that affect work?” “Well I just kept driving.” (RegularM27)

This intentional sanction defiance may signal an altered perception of the risk of apprehension, and/or a dismissal of the severity/appropriateness of the sanction itself.

Discussion

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the reasons drivers choose to comply with or exceed speed limits. Qualitative explorations are effective in gaining a more thorough appreciation of issues by allowing opportunities for elaboration beyond that available from quantitative methods (Forward, 2006).

Current findings indicate Rare Speeders view speed limit compliance as necessary, easy, and the right/moral thing to do. This is consistent with findings from a West Australian study where the two most influential factors on intentions not to speed were beliefs that speeding was easy to control, and a perceived moral obligation to not speed (coupled with feelings of regret for having exceeded speed limits) (Elliott, 2001). For our Rare Speeders, ease of compliance with speed limits seems partly linked to time-management. Proactive strategies to avoid feeling pressured to speed were commonly discussed among these drivers. Conversely, Regular Speeders highlighted difficulty with speed limit compliance, often citing the necessity to speed to arrive on time. Feelings of time pressure, or running late, have previously been identified as factors contributing to speeding (Forward, 2006; McKenna, 2005). Therefore, control over speed choice is an important distinction between Rare and Regular Speeders. Perhaps there is merit in conveying the message that individuals, rather than external factors, are in command of the driving episode.

Though the subjective belief that speeding saves time is commonly reported among speeders, it has been difficult to challenge, due to the lack of an objective measure of its accuracy. Recently, a study using an in-vehicle Intelligent Speed Adaptation (ISA) system offered an empirical opportunity to test this (Regan et al., 2007). Vehicles fitted with ISA delivered visual and auditory warnings, as well as upward pressure on the accelerator, when a posted speed limit was exceeded by 2km/hour or more. For commuting trips, comparisons with a control group indicated that mean speeds for the treatment drivers decreased when using ISA, yet did not equate to any appreciable increase in trip time. This finding may help to convince drivers that speeding does not necessarily/automatically equate to time saving and may assist the debate about the benefits of complying.

A moral imperative to observe speed limits was commonly mentioned by our Rare Speeders, yet is absent from Regular Speeders' discussions. Consistent with previous investigations of speeding drivers, our findings indicate Regular Speeders feel little or no compulsion to heed legislative requirements, selecting travelling speeds based on personal convenience or enjoyment (Fylan et al., 2006; Silcock et al., 2000). Statements indicating a lack of awareness of, or attention to speed limits suggest Regular Speeders may hold a more casual

attitude to enforcement measures than other types of drivers and believe they are immune from legislative compliance and associated consequences. This interpretation is reinforced by intentional sanction defiance (e.g., driving whilst suspended). As licence sanctions appear ineffective in deterring some drivers, vehicle sanctions (e.g., impoundment) may need to be considered as a future countermeasure. The differences between driver types described above could be underpinned by fundamental differences in beliefs about the necessity and personal relevance of speeding laws. It may be that Regular Speeders' previous experiences of avoiding punishments may contribute to these beliefs, further reinforcing the perception that speeding is low-risk.

An important distinction between the groups relates to the attention given to the driving task. Rare Speeders expressed strong views about the need to be mindful of safety (self and others). This is consistent with previous research, where drivers with intentions to not break speed limits expressed greater concern about negative consequences of non-compliance (Forward, 2006). Conversely, Regular Speeders offered little consideration of this issue, instead referring to the driving task as automatic and an absent-minded endeavour. Thus, driver distraction may be particularly relevant to those who speed regularly, and as such, may be associated with an elevated crash risk, beyond that associated with faster speeds. This area requires greater research attention.

In conclusion, a number of inferences can be drawn from the findings about why some drivers choose not to speed. For some, this may reflect the effectiveness of current speeding countermeasures. Secondly, it may be that those who do not speed are proactive in their choices, basing the decision on carefully considered safety-related values. Conversely, those who willingly defy speed limits may do so because of a perceived immunity from legislative compliance, based on experiences of having successfully avoided sanctions, with little pre-meditated consideration given to alternative ways of driving. It has been highlighted elsewhere that this group of drivers is perhaps the most resistant to traditional efforts of behaviour change (Fylan et al., 2006). Given these distinctions, the remainder of drivers appear to fall somewhere between these two extremes. Future countermeasures could appeal to this group of 'undecided' drivers using factors that appear pertinent to those who choose not to speed. For example, issues such as trip planning (time-management) and associated ease of compliance, safety of self/others, stress-free driving, reinforcement of 'the right thing to do', and challenges to the notion that speeding saves time could be used to promote the concept that there are positive consequences associated with choosing not to speed.

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Appendix 1

Demographic information for each driver group

Group	n	Mean Age	SD (years)	Age Range
Female <25 years	18	19.33	2.2	17-24
Male <25 years	7	19.6	2.7	17-24
Female 25-50 years	6	42.5	4	35-47
Male 25-50 years	4	37.5	5.04	32-45
Female >50 years	6	60.8	3.7	55-64
Male >50 years	4	64.3	7.1	56-73
Speed Regularly (2 male, 10 female)	12	34.25	14.74	18-59
Speed Rarely (5 male, 5 female)	10	46.4	18.01	26-77

Appendix 2

Number and percentage of drivers reporting speeding offences, crashes and licence sanctions are greater for those who report speeding regularly, even when compared with the high-risk driver group - young males

Group	No. people reporting offences	%	No. people reporting crashes	%	No. people reporting licence sanctions	%
Speed Rarely ($n = 10$)	1	10	0	0	0	0
Speed Regularly ($n = 12$)	10	83	5	42	4	33
Males <25 years ($n = 7$)	3	42	3	16	0	0