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## THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF DRIVING BEHAVIOR: COMMUNICATIVE ASPECTS OF JOINT-ACTION

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Mid-American Review of Sociology, 1988, Vol XIII, No. 1:59-67

*This paper identifies destiny-drivers, casual-cautious drivers, and social-occasion drivers, as the primary participations in the driving environment, and argues that accidents occur when there is a breakdown in establishing joint-action among and between these drivers. Leftlaners are also discussed within the context of the above designated drivers, and another potentially dangerous driver, the meditator, is introduced. The meditator is one who, for a variety of reasons, has some unresolved issue in contemplation. Other drivers emerging in the driving environment are dining-room, powder-room, library, and indicator drivers.*

### INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have paid little or no attention to driving behavior as a social phenomenon even though it has been the cause of thousands of deaths and injuries. Driving is one of the most intense forms of communication and interaction -- where joint-action, interpretation, observation and social participation take place. Driving behavior is said to account for over 50,000 deaths each year. It has been argued that more deaths have resulted from accidents than resulted from all the wars in which the United States participated. In Houston, Texas, approximately 250 of an estimated 260 to 530 accidents are reported each day to the Records Division of the police department. This suggests a serious breakdown in joint-action in the driving environment of the city.

Fitting lines of action together or establishing joint-action in the driving environment requires taking note of the action of others as indications are made. This assumes that the meaning of the indications are shared by the actors in the environment.

Eighty-five percent of the accidents in the city occur when drivers are not taking note of action in their driving world. This means that they are not able to fit their action to the actions of others or form joint-action in driving. The other fifteen percent of the accidents result from inadequate interpretations of acts and symbols, inappropriate designations, confused meanings, and mischosen alternative responses.

Most accidents occur in Houston between 7 to 8 a.m and 5 to 6 p.m. Thus, hostility is not a powerful enough variable to explain accidents, as psychoanalysts might be tempted to suggest. Other explanations of freeway accidents cite rampant aggressiveness, high speeds, and crowded freeways and highways. However, these are not distractions to establishing joint-action on highways. Some distractions are the attitudes of drivers, their dispositions in driving, combing hair, eating, feeding babies, husbands, and wives, applying make-up, lighting cigarettes, attempting to kill an insect, picking up objects on the car floor, meditating or reflective thinking,

talking, etc.

Given the number of people coming into the city of Houston daily, it is not surprising that the National Safety Council figures confirm the grim fact that Houston's traffic is the deadliest of the nation's larger cities. The death rate per 100,000 population is nine percent higher than Los Angeles, twice that of Detroit, more than three times that of Philadelphia, and more than double that of New York and Chicago. The figures suggest that the traffic situation in Houston is out of control and that it will get worse. Over 300 new vehicles are reported to be added to the driving environment in Houston each day.

The majority of the explanations for most of Houston's accidents are merely conditions and symptoms of the problems. All accidents result from the failure or inability of drivers to establish joint-action with objects in the driving environment. Thus, when there is a breakdown in joint-action in the driving environment, accidents will occur. Preventing this breakdown requires taking note of significant acts and actors in the driving environment; understanding and interpreting gestures, symbols and indications adequately, and sharing appropriate meanings of the driving world in the process of establishing joint-action.

Driving is learned behavior, which is primarily self-initiated. A significant number of individuals are taught driving basics in high school, or by relatives and friends, or private firms established to offer services in driver education. Experience is gained in the process of learning. Although driving lessons are usually conducted over a short period of time, the majority of drivers complete them on the crowded streets and freeways and gain additional experience after passing the formal test.

The social context of the driving environment includes participants with varying experience, styles, meanings, anticipations, and attitudes toward driving. There are also a variety of driving cultures within the driving environment. These cultures are the basis for understanding driving in the American Social Order and for offering solutions to the problems of driving which cause a very substantial number of deaths.

This analysis is based upon extensive interviews, participant observation and the investigation of accident reports.

#### DRIVING AS A SOURCE OF REVENUE

Driving behavior provides the cities and states with a substantial amount of revenue. Each driver pays fees for a license, license plates, and vehicle registration. The violation of driving rules and restrictions is another source of revenue. Police officers are made to believe that they must demonstrate their functionality through issuing tickets. However, their function begins after-the-fact of the alleged violations. Consequently, they do not really render preventive service. Their services primarily legitimize themselves and bring additional revenue to cities and states. There could be a significant reduction in traffic accidents if police services were before the fact of violations, attempting to prevent the occurrence of traffic violations. Such an approach would decrease the revenues from this source.

Presently, driving is a functional part of city and state economies. Regulations of driving behavior has become a source of significant revenue. Crowding on the freeways and streets is one indication of how profitable driving behavior is to

cities and states.

The rules and procedures for driving do not usually take the differing cultures found in each town, city, state, or village into account. Nor do they address the cultural and interactional driving context.

Few drivers remember, attend to, or assist others in obeying the legal codes. Drivers also pay little attention to suggestions posted on streets and freeways. Most abandon the teaching, instructions, and warnings received during their classes because they feel restricted and inhibited by such instructions. For example, instructions that drivers keep both hands on the wheel, look out for the other driver, get into the exit lane at a safe distance prior to making the exit, and give proper signals before shifting lanes are usually ignored. Most drivers do not give any signals, and a significant number of the others signal only immediately upon shifting lanes or after they have made the initial move to shift. In many cases, the attitude is that once indication is made, in spite of its lateness, the driver has the right to make the shift and others should yield to such right. Anticipatory behavior, which is essential to participation in driving, is also absent in most of the cases.

#### THE NATURE OF DRIVING BEHAVIOR

Driving behavior consists of people interacting with one another. Because they drive within the context of a group, drivers must necessarily fit their actions to those of the other. The very nature of driving behavior dictates that driving public are embedded in a social situation created by the action of others. Driving interaction is the presentation of action, a request for a reaction. The clerk and the customers, the student and the teacher, fits their action to the other's action. Orderly social interaction takes place when the different lines of activity of different actors mesh smoothly.

One must not ignore the process of driving interaction itself in order to understand the causes of so many accidents which result in thousands (50,000) of deaths each year. A powerful causal explanation will not be provided by concentrating on the causes which precede interaction or the structural and legal context of the interaction.

There are two basic categories of driving interaction -- symbolic and non-symbolic. Symbolic interaction takes place when the participants interpret one another's acts and formulate their own actions on the basis of the meaning they derive from the interpretation. Non-symbolic interaction takes place spontaneously, without reflection. This form of interaction is used primarily among animals, but also among human beings. People tend to be unaware of their involvement in non-symbolic interaction because it is, by definition, spontaneous and unreflective (Blumer, 1969).

Most important interaction takes place on the symbolic level, primarily by means of gestures. A gesture is part of an action indicating the rest of the action to come. Both words and movements are gestures, which constitute the basic parts of driving interaction. Participants respond to what they expect others to do, as well as to what others have already done.

A gesture implies two things: 1) the nature of the remainder of the action of the person making it, which it precludes, and 2) that there will be a particular response to it by the person to whom it was made. Intrinsically, therefore, a

gesture is joint action as it cannot take place in the absence of another person (Blumer, 1969).

There are three identifiable parts of symbolic interaction: 1) the designation or indication (an act or gesture); 2) the interpretation of the designation; and 3) the devising of a response on the basis of the interpretation. Driving behavior, consisting of actions by various individuals, necessitates constant interpretation of the actions of others so that responses on the basis of the interpretation might be devised. During a robbery, for example, the thief indicates to the victim how he should act by telling him to raise his arms or lie on the floor. The victim, interpreting the gesture (the request) and the intent of the thief, will decide whether to comply. The thief pointing a finger instead of a gun, or water dripping from the gun, will make a difference to the victim's interpretation of the intent and seriousness of the request (Blumer, 1969).

Thus, for drivers to fit their actions together smoothly and reduce accidents, they must understand the intended meaning of one another's gestures and must interpret the actions similarly. The whole process of driving interaction depends upon the ability of the driver to take one another's roles, and thereby to understand what other drivers are thinking and planning to do. Communication is not interstimulation and response, it is the use of the significant symbol. Consequently, communication between drivers must be consciously recognized and must anticipate the response of the other.

#### DRIVING AND THE DRIVER

Driving behavior takes place in the form of acts, and may be analyzed three ways using contemporary social science orientations. First, the Stimulus-Response Theory argues that a reacting organism produces a sequence of action in a series of neuromuscular responses to a set of stimuli. This perspective cannot easily be applied to complex acts involved in driving behavior. Second, motivational theory suggests that people act on certain motives. A motive is defined as an initiating agent that drives the organism to action. This view implies that to learn the motives of someone is to anticipate what they will do. Third, sociological theories suggest that social forces cause action. One view considers behavior to be based on internalized norms or values, which are cultural prescriptions, or behavioral rules. Another sociological view is that external frameworks, or structures impose particular kinds of behavior on people. Roles, for instance, impose standards of conduct on the people who adopt them (Skidmore, 1979).

Driving conduct in the form of acts is not a causal outgrowth or expression; instead, it is constructed by the actor (the driver). The driver can do much more than respond to stimuli -- she can observe, think about and act upon the stimuli. Drivers build their conduct in relation to stimuli rather than in response. Drivers are able to take note of their actions in progress. Thus, they can act back upon their act -- they can guide, control, check or even stop it. Drivers can "stand over against" their act as it develops. They can identify their impulse, objectify it as a want or wish, and set their goal and plans for reaching it. As drivers act they take into account a variety of external objects, including the behavior of other drivers, fitting their own action to the actions of others. They can continue to make their plans -- to map out their act -- as they proceed with the overt phase of their act.

Driving acts need not be rational in the sense of being wise. Some drivers make errors of interpretation and judgment as they plan and proceed with action. At times they attempt to achieve goals by inappropriate methods. Often they do not see the real implications and consequences of their acts. Consequently, acts can be stupid or wise, they can involve foresight and careful analysis of preconditions and consequences, or they can be rash and irrational.

Driving acts, once begun, need not be completed. Drivers often transfer, divert, or terminate acts before they are completed. Drivers must decide whether to seek the goal to which they are directing their efforts, and if their efforts will achieve the goal. Their judgment about their action can change as they proceed and they can modify or halt their action.

It is possible for drivers to interact with themselves without objectifying the self within the interaction. For example, drivers who are deeply engrossed in driving, can interact with themselves as they figure out their motives, but they are thinking about the driving rather than about themselves. However as drivers construct their acts, it may become necessary to make an object of themselves, considering the impact their acts may have on them. They might ask themselves, for instance, what will these drivers think of us if we do what we are planning to do? (Charon, 1979).

Drivers preparing to begin the overt act (to make a move to switch lanes, overtake, etc.) -- who have their goals defined, identified, and their plans laid -- still have to take into account the acts of other drivers as they begin to carry out their overt action. If they wish to complete their act, they must avoid preventative counter acts by other drivers. They must fit their action into those of the other drivers. Often, drivers must change the direction of their acts in order to integrate them.

Objects not immediately involved in an act under formation can have a profound effect on driving behavior. For example, a driver about to pull from the left lane across to the right lane to avoid missing an exit, may change his course of action if he fears an accident or a death may result.

Objects in the driving environment must be identified and analyzed as they come to be involved in the process of an act. Modification can occur as the relations of objects to the on going driving act change. In the construction of a driving act, the drivers do not note everything involved in their action. They make only scattered notations, usually as they must make a plan or a choice. This notation to the self, however, is just one narrow phase of the entire act. The self does not constantly direct the act. When the self intercedes in the driving act, drivers consciously take note of every part of their act.

All action has unconscious aspects. Someone may not be aware of the impulse to which he is responding, or even that he is responding. Not only is it possible for someone to be stirred into action by an impulse that cannot be identified; it is also possible to objectify an impulse -- to define it incorrectly. An impulse misrepresented to the self will elicit action constructed in response to misrepresentation. Drivers often act on misjudged definitions of a situation, without making a careful, probing examination of the impulse they objectify.

In the formation of driving conduct, there is a constant interplay between impulse and image. Impulses initiate acts and images give direction to impulses. The image gives the impulse form and organization -- it is the structure and direction of the developing act.

Driving behavior consists of interaction between drivers. It is not simply an aggregation of separate organisms acting independently. The essence of driving behavior is that the individual, constructing his act, must take into account the behavior of other drivers implicated in the driving act. Hence, driving behavior is an ongoing process in which participants take one another into account, and fit their lines of action together. Thus, driving is a social act, a joint or collective action, made up by the fitting together of the lines of action of the separate participants. Driving behavior consists of people acting together to achieve a goal (Charon, 1979).

In cities, communities or towns, various driving cultures exist. Conflict in driving is inevitable as drivers in different driving cultures do not always fit their lines of together. Drivers do not always understand the meaning of one another's gestures or interpret them similarly. Driving interaction depends entirely upon the ability of drivers to take the role of the other in the process of driving. This is how joint action on the highway is achieved.

Driving, then, requires reciprocity. A participant withdrawing or not responding consistently with the act engaged in or indicated, can effect break down or change of the social action. This usually results in an unanticipated act. It is within this breakdown of interaction that accidents occur.

Most accidents occur when drivers interact at the non-symbolic level and do not establish joint action in the driving space. The driving space is the area of visual observation of about a hundred yards in circumference from which drivers might make important driving observations, accurate interpretations, and sound judgments about the driving behavior of others in relation to their own driving action. The socio-cultural context of driving might be simple, say in rural areas, yet complex in large urban areas, especially where there are various ethnic and international groups occupying the driving environment. It is more difficult to achieve joint action in more complex socio-cultural driving situations.

#### TYPES OF DRIVERS AND DRIVING BEHAVIOR IN A GROWING CITY

Houston is one of the fastest growing cities in America. Approximately 1000 persons come to the city each week, approximately two-thirds of which are active drivers. These new residents come primarily from Mexico, India and Asia, Canada, Africa, the Caribbean, and from other parts of the United States. They bring with them various diverse norms, values, belief-systems, and modes of driving. This results in a number of driving cultures interacting intensely to produce conflict in gestures, interpretation, anticipation, and communication. The large number of accidents in Houston and in other large cities where multiple driving cultures interact can be related to the conflict in driving cultures.

In Houston there are three distinct driving cultures. Casual-cautious drivers represent one of the three cultures. These drivers operate in the middle lane, at or below the speed limit. Social-occasion drivers represent the second culture. They occupy the left or the extreme right lane whichever, is free for visual observation and casual conversation among the participants in the car. Destiny drivers, the third cultural type, operate in the left lane, if clear, but also in any other lane that is free. These drivers usually exceed the speed limit and shift from

lane to lane to avoid being boxed in by cautious-casual and social-occasion drivers. Social-occasion and casual-cautious drivers impede the progress of destiny drivers.

The problem is more complex in Houston because there is no functional fast lane concept. A significant number of drivers may be classified as "leftlaners" causing additional or compound problems in achievement of joint-action.

#### *Leftlaners*

Leftlaners are drivers who feel more safe and secure driving in the left lane. Leftlaners are found in all three of the driving cultures. Their driving behavior conforms to left hand side of the road driving with passing on the right. In countries where this is standard practice, steering wheels are positioned on the right hand side of the cars which makes for easy observation of passing cars.

Leftlaners assume that they have a right to occupy the left lane without any interference from other drivers whether they are going the speed limit or not. Any passing attempt must occur on the right side contrary to standard driving practices.

There are three types of leftlaners -- the chronic, the occasional, and the convenient. All three types are potentially dangerous because of the position others must assume in relation to them. The convenient leftlaner will shift lanes to assume the most convenient lane, often the left lane. The chronic and the occasional leftlaners are more likely to get trapped in the left lane than the convenient leftlaner. Being trapped creates a dangerous situation. The possibility of an accident increases when they anxiously cut-across three or four lanes of active traffic to exit. The convenient leftlaner does get trapped and creates no real danger in this respect. However, the mobility needed to seek convenience renders the convenient leftlaner dangerous. Chronic leftlaners who drive at the posted speed limit believe they have the legal right to stay in the left lane, unmolested by anyone indicating for them to move over. This attitude is evident even when the police, ambulance, and fire truck attempt to pass.

The leftlaners of the social-occasion and casual-cautious drivers tend to move to the left lane for no obvious reason and cannot be anticipated by others in the driving environment. Personal testimony as well as data from police records provide evidence that a substantial number of accidents occur between destiny drivers and the social-occasion or casual-cautious drivers. It is also evident that those who conform to casual-cautious and social-occasion driving are the elderly, the handicapped, and those who have been driving for less than six months. Some pocket traffic jams on the freeway are caused by leftlaners, casual-cautious, and social-occasion drivers occupying the front lanes, not allowing other drivers to pass. In such cases the leftlaner does not move over for passing to take place and is sometimes boxed in the left lane by the traffic bearing down on the front three drivers. Drivers who are immediately behind the front three vehicles anticipate a break because in front of the drivers are clear lanes while behind them the traffic is almost at a stand still.

Pocket traffic jams on a main street occur when leftlaners pair with slow trucks and other slow drivers in the right lane and impede passing. Again traffic becomes congested causing the destiny drivers to maneuver from lane to lane hoping for a break-through. The destiny driver's aggressiveness is encouraged by the view that ahead of the leftlaner and the social-occasion or the casual-cautious right lane driver, is open roadway. Any attempt by the destiny driver to force the leftlaner

to give way by blowing the horn or blinking the lights, indicating a desire to pass, is reacted to negatively. Leftlaners either ignore the indication, or they put on brakes. Some, however, will move over to the right lane to allow passing, and immediately thereafter reassume the left lane position.

Often, leftlaners will make right turns from the left lane due to lack of planning or because they are trapped in their lane. There are leftlaners who in such cases slow down or even stop waiting for an opportunity to make the turn.

There is also a new group of potentially dangerous drivers in Houston. This group we have labeled meditators or dreamers who think contemplatively as they drive. This kind of driving behavior will be more evident as the economy worsens and Houston's population increases. These drivers are dangerous as they are not attending to the rules, signals, and actions of the driving process, and are unaware during meditation and contemplation of the driving environment. Their control of the social situation in the intense and ongoing interaction is lost. They become ineffective participants.

The meditators cannot consciously respond to the gestures being made by other drivers. This is necessary to minimize and avoid driving conflicts. No response is offered by the meditator because they are locked into their contemplation and not receiving the indications made by other drivers. Blowing the horn, or some potential mishap caused by their erratic or staggering driving, may alert them to consciously attend to the driving environment.

Many meditators are also leftlaners. They not aware of their freeway exits until they are unable to plan or negotiate a successful turnoff. Unsafe drivers in any lane, they may move into part of another lane temporarily. Nonetheless, they are safer in the extreme right lane. While meditating they are incapable of interpreting the indications of other drivers and devising anticipatable responses for joint-action to occur. When joint-action breaks down conflicts in driving are inevitable.

### CONCLUSION

There are several things that must be done if accidents are to be reduced and the lives of drivers saved.

First, drivers must realize that conflict-free driving occurs when drivers attempt to interact with each other cooperatively, not solely by obeying primary legal rules for driving. Legal right of way is not the essential consideration in the driving environment. Joint-action requires reciprocity to avoid total breakdown in social action. It also requires adequate gesture indications of intentions. Driving is a social process. Drivers must construct their acts on the basis of others' actions and anticipated actions.

The driving environment is not simply an aggregation of separate drivers acting independently. The actions of an individual driver within the environment are necessarily connected with the actions of other drivers in the driving area. Every driver's act must be adapted to the actions of others. Hence, the driving environment, especially the driving area, or space, is an ongoing social process in which all the participants must take one another into account, and fit their lines of action together. When drivers fail to accomplish joint-action, accidents will occur. In driving environments where various driving cultures interact at a high degree of intensity, the occurrence will increase.

Other drivers emerging in the driving environment can be categorized even though there are a limited number of them. Increasingly, there are the dining-room drivers, who have a number of food items on the passenger's seat and eat as they drive. There are powder-room drivers who have a number of make-up items on the dashboard, or the passenger's seat, and administer these to the face and hair. The activity is initiated during stops, but continues as they move along in traffic.

Both types of driver make it difficult to establish joint-action. They are just as dangerous as those identified previously. Their behavior is most often observed in the mornings and when they are leaving work. One driver informed us that this is done when one has a date after work or is going to happy hour.

One woman was observed applying make-up to her face for about seven blocks through several stop lights and signs. In every case she was slow to leave the lights and stop signs and was not driving steady. Other drivers attempted to avoid her. When asked at one stop why she was engaged in such behavior, she answered, "I have to fix my face!"

Also emerging is the indicator-driver who indicates intent to shift from one lane to another and then proceeds to do so regardless of how close, fast, safe or dangerous the move might be. The library-driver carries newspapers, pamphlets, and even books to read at every opportunity. Again, the activity continues as the traffic moves faster, making it more difficult to establish joint-action.

Different neighborhoods have different driving norms. Drivers do not change their driving posture and attitudes when they move into different neighborhoods. In such cases, attempts at joint-action cause frustration, anger, confusion, and hostility between drivers. Often the responses are, "Why don't you go back to the country (the city), you country driver (you city driving fool)?" This difference is also observed when drivers come to the city from out-of-town. Adjustments to establish joint-action between drivers are difficult.

The conflicts which lead to driving accidents and deaths result from the absence of or breakdown in joint-action between the various drivers. Attempt to reduce accidents and prevent deaths must consider the nature of joint-action in the driving environment. Distractions should be viewed as diminishing drivers' ability to establish joint-action. Drivers are therefore embedded in a social situation created by the actions and responses of each other.

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