# Can speeding be justified?

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There is a lot of community acceptance of speeding and the kinds of justifications that are given centre around people regarding themselves as good enough drivers to decide what speed to travel at for themselves. There is an evident lack of acceptance of speed limits. It seems that no matter how much better roads are and with speed limits up to 110 km per hour, there remains a strong desire to exceed speed limits. The level of acceptance of speeding is fairly widespread and besides the problems this causes amongst experienced drivers it sets a very bad example to young drivers. Many drivers of all ages experience being 'pushed along' in traffic above what they are comfortable with, which is typically exceeding speed limits. Many drivers exhibit a great deal of impatience with drivers travelling at or near the speed limit and can become quite aggressive. On highways where there are 60 km/h zones these are often ignored by drivers who either fail to notice what speed they are doing and the change in acceptable speed limit, or simply choose to ignore speed limits in these areas. This paper explores the culture of speeding that appears to be an implicit part of acceptable driving practice.

I have been examining a lot of the literature and research on driving attitudes, young drivers, and speeding and the more I looked at it the more I realised there was a gender issue operating that is important and needs to be discussed. The way we drive is influenced by a culture or cultures around driving and these tend to be male dominated. The kinds of cultural influences operating in male attitudes to driving and the enforcement of rules encompass beliefs and ideals as well as the kinds of actions that will be determined by these. While it may appear to be great fun to express one's individuality as a person through cars and driving, the roads are not an appropriate place to do it. The needs and functions of driving have changed, there are more cars on the road and drivers with varied needs and interests as drivers, yet male ideals of driving remain dominant. Expressing oneself through the kind of car one has is one thing, but expressing it in the way one drives is not really a luxury we can afford.

This paper will discuss some of the cultural aspects of driving by looking at attitudes as they are reported in a number of forms. One form is research reports and statistics, another is qualitative studies and discussion papers, and finally there are newspaper letters to the editor (not to mention advertising and magazines which I will not deal with here). I will examine a few of these as exemplifying certain community reactions to policing of speeding.

Male attitudes to driving, passed down from father to son can be detrimental for purely economic and strategic reasons—there is a lot more traffic to deal with and social environments need to be protected. Consequently, there are a range of necessary limits to where cars can be treated in certain ways. Men have different attitudes and purposes around driving (Walker, 1996; Rothe, 1994) and while these are not necessarily wrong they certainly need to be put into perspective. Many men like cars and driving, and many driver-centred initiatives have consequently moulded our environment. Driver-centred means that roads tend to carve their way through our lives with priority expected if not given, to the needs of drivers. Young male drivers are to some extent casualties of a masculine dominated culture in driving.

## A survey

The 1999 Community Attitudes Survey shows that 87% of the population surveyed (a total of 1600) agree that speed limits are generally set at reasonable levels—50% even strongly agree; and yet 82% of males and 72% of females speed at least sometimes. Only 35% consider speed to be the most important factor contributing to crashes and 58% mention it when nominating 3 causes of crashes. 65% of males and 47% of females consider fines for speeding as revenue raising and 39% of males and 27% of females consider it okay to exceed the speed limit if they are driving safely.

While 49% of females support strict enforcement of the 60 km/h speed limit, only 39% of males do, and in 100 km/h zones, 44% of females but only 25% of males support strict enforcement. 52% consider doing 5 kms or more over the speed limit acceptable in a 60 km/h zone and 64% tolerate 5 kms or more above the speed limit in a 100 km/h zone—10% at 115 km/h or more.

After a crack down on speeding over the December/January break in 1998/99 a number of letters appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald, many of which complained about the increased police presence and fines for speeding. There have been complaints of this kind for a number of years and it is interesting to note that no matter how much roads have been improved and speed limits increased, it is never enough. Many expect to travel faster. There are many consequences of speeding which drivers fail to accept due to an underlying acceptance of the need and right to speed.

To a great extent authorities have tried to cater to the demands of motorists and this has included creating opportunities for higher speeds—motorways and highway upgradings and so on. Nevertheless police and other authorities are accused of opportunism when it comes to policing speed limits.

It is clear that men are more likely to speed than women, though that is changing, particularly amongst younger women, and the culture of driving has been dominated by a masculine culture of pushing the limits and risk taking. This has grave consequences for the public in general, but particularly for younger drivers who then take on the same attitudes about speeding.

There is also a strong denial of the consequences of speeding with many feeling that they are sufficiently skilled drivers to handle the vehicle and whatever conditions might present themselves. It is becoming more and more evident, however, that it is not just skill that matters.

## A good driver

What is a good driver? Often this is based on level of skill, and males tend to see themselves as far superior in handling motor vehicles than females. Young males will typically make derogatory comments about female drivers, just as they did in the 1950s (RTA 2000), despite the fact that many more women do drive and women have a better safety record—fewer deaths and hospital admissions (FORS, 1998a), fewer violations and less risky driving (FORS, 1998b). The fact that women do have a better safety record appears to only encourage the idea that women are inferior which indicates that good driving is strongly equated with riskier practices for men—pushing the vehicle to its limits and being able to handle it, getting ahead of the traffic, being in front, and so on. Women are generally more content with taking their time to get where they need to go, and less concerned about demonstrating the virtues of the vehicle or their driving skills.

Young women drivers are not becoming the same as young men, however, they are becoming more aggressive. They don't want to show off their vehicle or their skills but they do feel they have to be aggressive to get where they want to go and are often in a hurry. It is of course not really possible to do straight comparisons between men and women since the variations between men as drivers and between women as drivers are at least as profound, if not more profound, but it is tempting to do so when there is so much rhetoric against women drivers. It is tempting to try to show without a doubt that where women might be certain kinds of drivers, men are another.

The main point I want to draw from this is that there is an emphasis, in motoring discourse at least, on the kinds of things that men tend to want, like cracking down on drivers guilty of 'lingering in the overtaking lane' instead of, as one motorist put it in a letter to the SMH's Motoring editor Peter McKay; 'meaningless Speed Kills campaigns ... why can't the RTA air commercials to combat incompetent driving?' (Mixed Grille Column, Saturday, January 30, 1999, p.81). What the letter writer considers 'incompetent driving' could be anyone who gets in his way, and there is an obvious preference for the right to speed being expressed over the need for caution and patience.

Letters to the editor of the Sydney Morning Herald in January 1999 reflect a level of community acceptance of speeding. These indicate that there is a great deal of objection to police targeting speeding as a major cause of road deaths. I will outline here the sorts of objections raised, the areas where the writers think the blame should

be placed (rather than speeding), and the sorts of strategies and justifications used to defend speeding.

The apparent 'good sense' implied in these letters indicates that the writers, all of whom are male, consider many in the community would agree with them, share their objection, and that what they are arguing does make 'good sense'. The fact that the paper has published them indicates that the editor regards them as reflecting a significant community sentiment or at least a popular controversial issue.

There are many reasons to think that there is a high level of community acceptance of speeding as a reasonable thing for 'responsible drivers' under 'the right circumstances', which generally means men. People say it in conversation fairly regularly and these writers offer a few reasonably well accepted arguments in defense of speeding. The less well thought out aspects of driving rules are those which most need to be talked about and considered. The main ones are a lack of awareness of the reasons for speed limits and the implied right that individuals, particularly males, should be able to decide for themselves what the limits should be.

The titles of the pieces themselves show the sentiment reflected; 'Speed not the worst killer on the road' and 'No such thing as one safe speed'. Speeding is clearly being defended in these titles as well as in the contents of the letters. The second title is more subtle in that one needs to read the relevant letter to see what it actually means (I did anyway, but I suspect some would know immediately). It also plays on the campaign, 'Safe speeding, there's no such thing'. A subtle change of words makes the change almost unnoticeable at first. What it means is that the speed limits themselves imply a 'safe speed', but because conditions, circumstances and driving ability vary they could not possibly be appropriate. Since the reason for having a speed limit is precisely because conditions, circumstances and driving ability vary, the claim can only be read as a justification for being able to decide the speed one wishes to travel at for oneself, which you can do, but only up to the point marked on the sign.

Speed limits seem to be taken as the minimum rather than the maximum appropriate speed. The annoyance exhibited by many drivers when anyone drives below the speed limit is a clear indication that there is a high expectation that people will at least travel as fast as the speed limit, certainly not less than it. Perhaps this indicates that the purposes and forms of speed limit signs ought to be reassessed.

The police, the RTA (Roads and Traffic Authority), and the Minister come under a lot of fire from most of these writers. Interestingly they are the authorities, the ones who institute the regulations which are both being called for and criticised in these letters. What is being called for is more policing of drug and alcohol use, better driver education, road maintenance, and roadworthy checks on vehicles. What is being criticised is policing of speed limits. This is a bit like the stereotyping of the bad driver that Eddie Butler-Bowden talks about in his paper 'Road Hogs to Road Rage' (1998, p.66-83). The problem driver is always someone else who does something that is really

bad compared to what the average driver does—take drugs, drink and drive etc.—while the average driver merely speeds.

Butler-Bowden states; 'According to popular lore, there are two fundamentally different types of bad driver—the inept and the dangerous—and virtually all driver stereotypes fit into one or other of these stereotypes. Examples of the inept include old men wearing hats, Volvo drivers, so-called "ethnics", caravaners, old ladies off to play bowls, "housewives" and, in fact, any woman. Examples of the dangerous include young hoons, taxi drivers and "truckies"' (1998, p.68). Who is left?—men of various ages driving various kinds of cars, who incidentally have been the ones making all the rules and influencing what happens on the road up until at least the 1980s. Typically, it seems what is desired is to have the rules apply to everyone else but not to themselves.

## The letters

The first letter I will examine is under the heading 'Speed not the worst killer on the road', which notes that the road toll in the Northern Territory over the holiday break was zero. There are no speed limits on many roads in the territory which seems a significant point to the writer in quoting the statistic, although he makes no allowance for the fact that the territory has a lower population and per capita generally has one of the highest road tolls in the country. He goes on to say that 'this news will certainly not improve the attitude of drivers in the region who receive a letter in the mail telling them that they were selected by the police radar speed-trapping lotto to contribute to the State road tax'.

The region being referred to is unclear—either it is the Northern Territory where they are fining people for speeding where there is no speed limit—the implication here is that speeding fines are irrational and irrationally doled out; or it is the NSW region, in which case the implication is that if there were no speed limit the roads would be safer and we wouldn't be getting 'arbitrarily' fined.

The 'attitude' which will not improve is also unclear. It could be the attitude that one should not be fined for merely speeding or it could be the attitude itself that speeding is okay. There is an underlying acceptance or at least acknowledgement in the ambiguity: the attitude that speeding is okay is both acceptable and therefore not to be disciplined, and unacceptable. If the attitude being referred to is the attitude that speeding is okay then why would it need improving if it were not also a questionable attitude? If the attitude is that being fined for speeding is a ridiculous waste of time, money and resources, which the rest of the letter supports, then there is tacit support for the idea that speeding is okay.

The writer goes on to state four factors causing road deaths and to claim that speeding is a cause only in 'highly selective cases'. What the 'highly selective cases' are is not outlined and so it is left to be inferred from what else is said. The writer regards alcohol and drug use as the real problems and accuses police of not tackling these enough—'I

would like to know why the police have given up on serious testing for drink drivers'. As the writer states, his concern here is related to his recent personal experience of an 'alcohol-related road death'. What the writer sees as insufficient police checks on the use of marijuana and the wearing of seat belts then becomes the subject of discussion.

The police are described by this writer as 'lazy', 'taking the easy way out' with their 'random mass-culling approach'. He objects to speed traps but states that if police must continue with them then they should patrol the roads and face drivers 'to tell them they have offended'. The latter idea involves the implication that the police are hiding from the public because their fines are unreasonable and they don't want to give drivers the opportunity to argue with them.

The writer clearly regards speeding as the least significant factor in road deaths and ends his letter with a threat to the government; 'the March election is on its way and ... responsible drivers are voters too'. Responsible drivers are not defined but rather implied here. The implication is that there are drivers who are 'responsible' enough to speed when they think it is appropriate and they should not be fined for doing so.

The second letter under this heading laments that 'Nothing has changed. ... the same tired old rhetoric' is being trotted out and that police are 'holding drivers culpable'. He demands that 'policing methods' change from 'reactive' to proactive' and that the police 'come out from behind the bushes'. The final line, 'The policeman you can see on the highway is a greater deterrent than the one you can't', suggests that the writer agrees with the need for policing, however this appears to contradict the complaint that police are 'holding drivers culpable'. While the last line appears to consider police presence a good thing the rest of the letter is an attack and complaint against the police.

Amongst the letters under the heading 'No such thing as one safe speed' there is one which clearly agrees with the campaign against speeding. The writers state that the campaign will result in drivers slowing down and that speed does affect the severity of injury. The letter is finished off in favour of fines as revenue raising which 'helps to pay for the hospital care of those already injured on the roads and, in the process, it might even save some lives'.

This letter, co-written by a woman and a man, looks at the broader implications of speeding—not just road deaths, but road casualties as well. It reflects acceptance of the speed regulations and regards this as common sense. To show how obvious it is that speed causes more severe injury in accidents they recommend to sceptics that they close their front door and then 'walk into it, then take a few steps back and run into it ....' . This 'small experiment' has the effect of making the point obvious, simple, down to earth, and indisputable.

Of the three remaining letters under this heading, two again dispute the need to police speed limits and the appropriateness or 'arbitrariness' of speed limits and the third is from the NSW Minister for Transport Carl Scully, defending the need and record of the government in dealing with road safety issues. The Minister reinforces the part that

speed plays in road fatalities, stating that 'it was a factor in 40% of fatalities in 1998'. He then goes on to highlight police operations in regard to the use of marked cars, random breath testing, and drug-driving laws.

The other letters state their agreement with the previous letters that have been analysed here and which were published a few days previous to these. In the first, speed cameras are referred to as 'remunerative' and the adage 'speed kills' is strongly disputed. 'Otherwise', it is stated, 'we would go back to the days of the little man with a flag walking in front of vehicles'. Here the writer is resorting to extremism to defend speeding and express indignation at being fined for merely speeding when other drivers are doing much worse things.

## Other research

It is interesting to note the amount of research cited by Peter Rothe (1994) which tries to establish the value (or lack) of enforcement and fines in an effort to argue, it seems, that speed should not be regulated to the extent that it is. Research (carried out overwhelmingly by males) which takes this view misses the point that we only have the convenience of independent road travel by having some standardised agreement as to how it should most effectively operate, and focuses primarily on road travel as if the rest of the social environment was inconsequential.

Rothe fails to discuss the problem of the differences between drivers, and within drivers at different times, and more importantly, the consequences for the social environments within which car travel occurs. When he focuses on research which concludes that speed variance is a greater problem for safety than high speed as such, he does not consider the possible reasons for speed variance—drivers not familiar with the road, preparing to turn, differences in confidence level of drivers, drivers looking for something such as a parking space and so on. It cannot be assumed that driving occurs on lonely highways with a standard driver in a standard state of consciousness (who would of course be male) when most of it involves complex social environments with varying conditions according to driver's varying needs.

A  paper given by Jeff Quayle given at the Road Safety Conference held in Canberra in 1999 also argues quite strongly for more flexibility on speed. The paper is titled 'Hit by Friendly Fire: Collateral Damage in the War Against Speed' which in itself implies a number of things. Firstly that there is a war on and secondly that there is tacit agreement amongst those on both sides that it is or should be, okay for some to speed. Quayle makes some important points about where speed limits should be reviewed but there is a definite intention in his argument to support the idea that speeding is okay for some drivers.

Quayle's main complaint is; 'The fundamental weakness of the mass enforcement of speed limits is that the aim of distinguishing the safe from the unsafe drivers is simply ignored'(489). How do we distinguish safe from unsafe drivers? It comes back to the

unsafe being everybody except those like oneself, as surveys in a number of places have shown. It is men who are more likely to speed and to see themselves as having the right to choose to speed and increasingly women are following suit—the average driver often does not seem to count what they do as problematic and so will justify or not notice their level of speed, tailgating and so on, considering it appropriate due to the ineptitude of all the other drivers.

## Conclusions

There have been too many grey areas in road safety due to a particular kind of culture that has moved from the view that driving is a very difficult, complex task that only specially able people are able to really manage, to mass licensing and car ownership, where it is commonly regarded as something anyone can do, but men can do it better. Driving was extremely male dominated for at least the first half of the century and men regarded themselves as superior and therefore more capable of driving than women (and anyone else they wanted to exclude such as various groups of immigrants). In the last few decades more and more women have taken on driving and now equal numbers of males and females choose to get their licenses. With the previous attitudes however, there has grown the dominance of male centred views—pushing the limits, taking risks and so on, as what driving is all about.

Certainly it is not the case that all men are aggressive drivers but men on the whole have dominated driving culture and seen it as their domain. They have wanted to push for faster cars and roads, and to decide to what extent they can stretch the rules. The 'good' driver seems clearly to be male and to be related more to the needs and desires of male drivers than female drivers. This is important in beginning to tackle the major cultural acceptance of bending the rules, as exemplified in the example of speeding. The speeding driver who feels he can speed because he is a good driver considers that others should move out of his way and make life easier for him.

Women taking the kids to school are assumed to be bad drivers because they take their time or are a bit more cautious about turning. They are likely to be thinking about the kids and don't 'get out of the way' quickly enough. Likewise, however, men and women commuters are likely to be thinking about work and pushing to get there as fast as they can. No one is more preoccupied or a worse driver than everyone else because of that. We are all less cautious at times when driving than we should be. That includes those who consider themselves the best drivers.

While those who regard themselves as 'good', 'safe' drivers would like to find ways to legalise their own practices they typically wish to exclude those who do not participate according to their standards. This is enough reason to maintain that driving should and must be regulated, including speed, and this will continue to be the case to an even greater extent in the future. Regulations in an area such as driving help to ensure that most have access to the opportunities that driving offers and that it does not merely favour one group at the expense of others.

Looking at ways to bring about greater community acceptance of the need for regulations is where our energy should be spent rather than establishing that some drivers are more competent than others and should therefore be in a position to make their own rules. Naturally regulations need to be reviewed and discussed but they also need to be considered in terms of the opportunities and advantages they create, such as facilitation of traffic flow and safety in a complex and varied context. How we as a society approach driving affects how young drivers take to the roads. There are many cultural ideals which contribute to the driving experience and which need to be examined by younger and more experienced drivers alike.

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