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Bad driving: what are we thinking?

New laws to curb dangerous driving highlight the fascinating psychology of the road



Our driving is guided by our psychological biases. Photograph: Anthony Redpath/Corbis

Last week the UK government announced a [crackdown on unsafe driving](#). From now on, those of us spotted tailgating or lane hogging will face on-the-spot fines of £100 and three penalty points. As [road safety minister](#) Stephen Hammond said: "Careless driving puts innocent people's lives at risk. That is why we have made it easier for the police to tackle problem drivers."

This initiative draws attention to a fascinating branch of science called [traffic psychology](#), which studies the human and environmental factors that influence our driving behaviour. Decades of research in [traffic psychology](#) suggests that poor driving is shaped by far more than carelessness or a subset of "problem drivers". Even the most skilled road users are subject to loss of social awareness, intuitive biases, contradictory beliefs, and limits in cognitive capacity.

Here are 10 of the most interesting psychological biases and errors we face when behind the wheel.

1. We fail to realise when we're being aggressive – or we don't care

We've all had the experience of a vehicle looming in our rear view and [hanging on the bumper](#). Many of us will also have tailgated, blocked or otherwise bullied other people in ways we wouldn't dream of doing in a face-to-face situation, such as standing in a queue. [Research shows](#) that younger drivers who score higher on personality measures of [sensation-seeking](#) and impulsiveness are more likely to behave aggressively behind the wheel. What's also interesting is that these drivers show less sensitivity to punishment, which means that simple punitive measures are unlikely to deter the most antisocial road users.

2. We believe we're safer than we really are

Once we've learned how to drive it soon becomes an automatic task. Over time we learn how to predict the actions of other drivers, which can lead to [the illusion that we control them](#). One area where people seem especially prone to error is in the judgement of relative speed: we tend to [overestimate how much time can be saved by driving faster while also underestimating minimal safe braking distance](#). The computations needed to make these judgements are [highly complex](#) and don't come naturally to us.

3. We forget that other drivers are people too ...

When someone accidentally walks into us on the street or their shopping trolley bumps into ours, the usual reaction is to apologise and move on. But when driving, near misses are often met with instant anger – and in the most extreme cases, [road rage](#). Research shows that drivers more readily [dehumanise other drivers and pedestrians](#) in ways they wouldn't when interacting in person. This loss of inhibition is similar to the way some of us behave in [online environments](#).

4. ... yet we behave more aggressively to those of 'lower status'

One interesting paradox is that even though we're prone to dehumanising other drivers, we still act according to social status. [Decades of research](#) shows that prolonged honking, tailgating, and other aggressive behaviours are more likely if the aggressor believes [they are the more important driver](#). What's particularly interesting is that these judgements can be based simply on the vehicles involved, with no knowledge of the person behind the wheel: larger cars generally outrank smaller cars and newer cars trump older ones. Drivers of more expensive cars are also more likely to [behave aggressively toward pedestrians](#).

5. We believe we can see everything happening around us

...

Our senses receive far more information than we can process at once, which makes [brain systems of attention](#) crucial for focusing resources on the most important events. Most of the time we fail to appreciate the enormous amount of information we miss, and this can add to a [false sense of security on the road](#). If you don't believe how fallible your attention is, try these simple tests devised by psychologist [Dan Simons](#), [here](#) and [here](#). The results will shock you.

6. ... yet we also think other drivers can't see us

This one is for all the nose pickers and earwax excavators. It isn't really an issue of safety ([or is it?](#)), but you know who you are and unfortunately so do we.

7. We attribute near misses to a lack of ability in other drivers ...

In general, we fail to account for situational reasons as to why other drivers might get in our way or seem to act dangerously. Psychologists call this the [fundamental attribution error](#) – we tend to attribute the mistakes of others to their personality or ability ("what an idiot!", "what a terrible driver!"), while excusing our own errors as situational ("that bit of road is dangerous", "I had to drive that fast or I would have been late").

8. ... while at the same time overestimating our own skills

If you think you're a highly skilled driver, the chances are you're not. About [80-90% of drivers believe they have above-average ability](#), and the more skilled we believe we are at something, the less likely it is to be true. This tendency for us to be blind to our own incompetence is called the [Dunning-Kruger effect](#). Of course, the upside is that if you believe you're a terrible driver, you're probably not as bad as you think.

9. We drive more recklessly when we're going solo

We generally drive less carefully and more aggressively [when we're alone](#) than when we have passengers. It isn't clear why this is, or whether we're conscious of this change in our behaviour.

10. We believe hands-free car phones are safe.

In the UK it is illegal to use a hand-held mobile phone while driving, whereas hands-free alternatives are allowed. This is a great example of the law lagging behind science: evidence shows that using a hands-free car phone is [no less dangerous than talking on a hand-held mobile phone](#). What makes these phone conversations unsafe isn't so much the act of holding the phone as being distracted by the conversation. The lack of body language makes such conversations especially demanding, requiring us to commit more cognitive resources and further distracting us from the road.

Driving is one of the most complicated behavioural tasks we accomplish in our lives. The fact that it seems so mundane – and that there are relatively few accidents – is a testament to the elegance of highway engineering, the genius of traffic signalling, and the sophistication of the human brain. Still, next time you're behind the wheel and feel annoyed, frustrated or have an itchy nose, ask yourself: are you falling prey to any of the above?

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