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Legal and Deviant Behavior at a Four-Way Stop: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

One hundred observations were made of motorist behavior at a four-way stop. The methodology was that of a qualitative study. Contrary to the author's previous impressions, many motorists violated the laws of the four-way stop. Even when it was not proper, observations showed: 1. Those going north or south often went before those going east or west; 2. Those going south often went before those going north; 3. Anyone often went before those in the center turn lane. Motorists sometimes developed their own rules that were contrary to the rules of law. This may possibly be due to cultural considerations in the Mexican-American border town where the observations were made.

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Edinburg, Texas is part of the Rio Grande Valley, a four-county area in deep South Texas, near the Mexican border. The population of both Edinburg and of the Rio Grande Valley each is 88% Hispanic, mostly Mexican American. Likewise, the local university, University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA), part of the University of Texas System, is 88% Hispanic, again mostly Mexican Americans. In fact, UTPA has more Mexican-American students than any other university in the United States.

Cultural Issues

When I first moved to Edinburg I was taken aback at how some people drove their cars, especially on University Drive, then mostly a four-lane highway that ran East and West past the university. Most drove well, but some seemed to drive recklessly and without caution. Twice, I was almost hit by a car coming from a restaurant or place of business, wanting to get onto the highway. In both instances, if I had not been able to drive immediately into the right-hand lane, there would have been a collision.

Also, I found that many drivers would tailgate me, driving very close to me without following proper car lengths behind, even on streets with a 55 mph speed limit (which I initially would not drive on because this seemed too fast for a city street). Thus, I would be driving 50 mph on one of these streets and a car behind me would be going the same speed but would be very close to me. If I had to stop suddenly it seemed highly likely that the car would slam into me from behind.

I discussed this dangerous driving with a colleague, Professor Israel Cuellar, who asked me if I had ever driven in Mexico (no, I had not), which he described as much more dangerous. He hypothesized that many Mexicans and Mexican Americans do not follow the rule of law when driving, but are more responsive to the contingencies, as B. F. Skinner (1971) would put it, i.e. to what behavior is rewarded and what is punished. Thus, if a certain kind of driving behavior is successfully rewarded repeatedly—the person gets where they want (reward) and without the punishment of an accident or a ticket from the police—that is rewarded behavior and the person will drive in that manner.

Of course there are cultural issues, e. g. why do some people of Mexican background drive in that way but perhaps less so people of an Anglo background? Perhaps it is a way of driving in

Mexico that is reinforced by cultural beliefs in both Mexico and in Edinburg, a Mexican-American border town. Culture can influence how a person behaves in a variety of circumstances, from ordinary, everyday behavior like driving, to major issues like marriage, family, mental health, etc. (Church & Ortiz, 2005; Cuellar & Paniagua, 2000; Triandis & Suh, 2002).

My Experience: Road Rage?

There is a 4-way stop at the intersection of Jackson Road and Sprague Road, in Edinburg, Texas, on the route I often take to drive to and from work. For a long time it appeared to me that people properly stopped, as provided by law. Then, the author was the victim of possible road rage (Galovski, Malta, & Blanchard, 2005; James & Nuhl, 2000). I describe this because it can be useful to understand why someone did a study, how the author's own personal experiences or beliefs relate to the research done (Gergen & Gergen, 2004; Glassner & Hertz, 2003).

I often travel on Jackson Road, a five-lane street (2 lanes each north and south, and a center turn lane that runs all the way throughout the two blocks north and south of Sprague Road). I was going to work, driving north on Jackson. I was in the left or fast lane, but realized I wanted soon to switch to the right-hand lane, as I wanted to stop first at the post office, which was further down the road on the right hand side. A car was going south, and was in the center turn lane, wanting to turn east, thus turning in front of me. Since it was clearly in the turn lane at the stop sign before I was, I waited for it to turn. I waited and waited, but it never went, so I finally decided to proceed. Just then, the car started its turn and came at me at a fairly fast rate of speed. The driver appeared to me to have an angry look. Had I not (a) driven fast and (b) quickly switched to the right-hand lane, the car would have hit me. I felt that I had been a victim of road rage. My turning quickly into the right-hand lane was aided by the fact that I had planned to move to that lane. Had I not had that intent, which probably added a few seconds to my actually turning, I might well have been struck by the other car.

This incident shows some of the problems in studying or defining road rage. It is quite possible that the driver was not exhibiting road rage but instead was showing poor driving or perhaps just the problem of both of us deciding to move at the same time. Thus, it can be difficult to know if a given instance of driving is actually road rage. Still, it made me curious about how motorists behave at this 4-way stop, and if their behavior is as law-abiding as I had previously thought.

Method

For the next 100 occasions, 50 times driving north and 50 times driving south, I paid special attention to what drivers did. Thus, I was doing qualitative research as a participant observer in a real-world setting (Robson, 2002). I observed whether or not motorists followed the law, what lane they were in, and what direction they were driving.

Results

Contrary to my previous perceptions that people behaved properly at the 4-way stop, I observed the following improper, illegal behavior. I provide the illegal behavior and my explanation for it. Even if they did not get to the stop sign first, the following illegal behavior often occurred:

1. Those going north or south often went before those going east or west. The speed limit is 30 miles per hour on Sprague, while it is 30 or 45 mph on Jackson (see #2 below for an explanation of the different speed limits). Also, Sprague is a typical city street of one lane each way, while Jackson is a large, 5-lane street.

2. Those going south often went before those going north. Since there is a school to the south of Sprague the speed limit there is 30 miles per hour (20 mph when a light is flashing, when school is beginning or letting out), and once you past Sprague going north the speed limit increases to 45 miles per hour. Thus, those driving south are used to faster, more aggressive driving.

3. Those going north or south, or those going east or west, often went before those in the center turn lane. The center turn lane received the least respect as this violation apparently occurred more consistently than either 1 or 2, above.

Discussion

Motorists sometimes developed their own rules that were contrary to the law. While most of the time the law was obeyed, on various occasions the three illicit behaviors mentioned above occurred. Thus, a kind of deviance was developed that probably seemed reasonable to those who engaged in it (Eisenman, 1991; Kelly & Clarke, 2003).

Research has shown that people sometimes do not obey stop signs or school zone speeds or have other reasons for not driving legally or safely (Harrell & Bereska, 1992; Huang & Cynecki, 2001; Johannson & Rumar, 1966; McKelvey, 1994; Polus, 1985; Trinkaus, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Van Houten & Malenfant, 1992). They likely do not see themselves as criminals or law breakers, but as people driving the way they want, which seems to them like the appropriate or at least the desired thing to do. From my observations, many exceed the speed limits, including in

the school zone (both when the school zone speed limit was 30 mph and when the 20 mph light was flashing).

Interviews

I interviewed ten people about 4-way stops, and all said that there were no problems, that it was a simple matter of following the law. However, one said that it is sometimes unclear who has the right of way when two people arrive at the same time. Another, a former policeman, said that while 4-way stop situations are usually obvious, sometimes people do not realize that when two arrive at the same time the person to the right has the right-of-way.

Thus, the interviews, like my earlier assumptions, pretty much put the 4-way stop situation in the context of an ordinary, easy, everyday situation. However, my qualitative study here gives another view, i.e. that there is more law violation at the 4-way stop than one might expect.

Conclusions

Although most obeyed the law at the 4-way stop, some did not. There was much more law violation, or deviance, than I had expected before I made my qualitative observations. Possibly, some of this is due to cultural considerations, i.e. that the vast majority of the people in the area are Mexican Americans, and are perhaps influenced by a Mexican or Mexican American view of driving that puts more emphasis on success in getting where one wishes—i.e. following the contingencies of reward or punishment-- rather than on obeying the letter of the law. This is, however, speculation which needs more research to see if it is true. Further, since I did not have a control group of Anglos or other cultures to compare with these drivers, it may be that almost any group would produce similar results, not just Mexicans or Mexican Americans.

Future research in this area might employ a quantitative methodology. Observers could be at a spot where they could observe traffic flowing in all directions. Or, better yet, with sufficient funds and technology, the traffic flow and stopping could be videotaped and counts could be made from the videotape. In either case, it would be important to have a rating of the reliability of observers' data, i.e. to make sure there is sufficient agreement on what each observer saw.

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